

Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad

Course Guidebook

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Rhodes College



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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Professor Biography | i |
| Course Scope | 1 |

LECTURE GUIDES

LECTURE 1

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| A Quartet of Sages | 4 |
|--------------------------|---|

Confucius

LECTURE 2

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Confucius's China | 7 |
|-------------------------|---|

LECTURE 3

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Becoming a Sage | 11 |
|-----------------------|----|

LECTURE 4

| | |
|---------------------------------|----|
| A Gentleman and a Scholar | 15 |
|---------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 5

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| Heaven and Earth | 18 |
|------------------------|----|

LECTURE 6

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Doing unto Others | 22 |
|-------------------------|----|

LECTURE 7

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| How to Rule a Kingdom | 26 |
|-----------------------------|----|

LECTURE 8

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| What a Sage Does | 29 |
|------------------------|----|

LECTURE 9

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Confucius and Confucianism | 33 |
|----------------------------------|----|

Table of Contents

The Buddha

LECTURE 10

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| India at the Time of the Buddha..... | 37 |
|--------------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 11

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| Siddhattha Gotama..... | 41 |
|------------------------|----|

LECTURE 12

| | |
|---|----|
| The First and Second Great Awakenings | 44 |
|---|----|

LECTURE 13

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Knowing the World | 47 |
|-------------------------|----|

LECTURE 14

| | |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Can't Get No Satisfaction | 50 |
|---------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 15

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Getting to the Farther Shore..... | 53 |
|-----------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 16

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| How the Buddha Taught | 56 |
|-----------------------------|----|

LECTURE 17

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| The Buddha and Buddhism..... | 59 |
|------------------------------|----|

Jesus

LECTURE 18

| | |
|--|----|
| The Jewish and Roman Worlds of Jesus | 62 |
|--|----|

LECTURE 19

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| The Son of Mary | 65 |
|-----------------------|----|

LECTURE 20

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| The First 30 Years | 68 |
|--------------------------|----|

Table of Contents

LECTURE 21

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| The Kingdom of God | 71 |
|--------------------------|----|

LECTURE 22

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Back to the Future | 74 |
|--------------------------|----|

LECTURE 23

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Jesus's Christology..... | 77 |
|--------------------------|----|

LECTURE 24

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| The Last Days in Jerusalem | 80 |
|----------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 25

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| How Jesus Became Christ | 83 |
|-------------------------------|----|

Muhammad

LECTURE 26

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Arabia in the Days of Ignorance | 86 |
|---------------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 27

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| The Trustworthy One | 90 |
|---------------------------|----|

LECTURE 28

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| "I Am Only a Messenger" | 93 |
|-------------------------------|----|

LECTURE 29

| | |
|--------------|----|
| Madinah..... | 97 |
|--------------|----|

LECTURE 30

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| "There Is No God but al-Lah" | 101 |
|------------------------------------|-----|

LECTURE 31

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| The Ethics of Islam | 105 |
|---------------------------|-----|

LECTURE 32

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| The Greater Jihad..... | 109 |
|------------------------|-----|

Table of Contents

LECTURE 33

| | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| The Conquest of Makkah | 113 |
|------------------------------|-----|

Conclusion

LECTURE 34

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Their Lives Compared | 117 |
|----------------------------|-----|

LECTURE 35

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Their Teachings Compared | 120 |
|--------------------------------|-----|

LECTURE 36

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Their Enduring Significance..... | 123 |
|----------------------------------|-----|

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Glossary | 126 |
| Bibliography..... | 136 |
| Credits | 155 |

Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad

Scope:

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad are among the most important and influential persons in history. They are remembered for the examples of their lives, their insights into the human condition and the nature of ultimate reality, and the religious movements they inspired. It would be hard to name another set of four persons who have more deeply affected so many human lives.

In this course, we examine these four figures both separately and comparatively in an effort to grasp the essential features of their lives and teachings and to explore the factors that contributed to their greatness. We will attend to the similarities and differences in their messages, in the patterns of their lives, and in the ways they impacted their followers and the rest of the world.

The investigation of each of the four follows the same general outline. To introduce each individual, we first sketch out the historical and cultural framework that informed his life and worldview. In each case, the subject of study was born into an ancient culture in ferment. The beginning lecture for each figure (except Jesus, for reasons noted below) expounds the nature of this societal turbulence and provides the relevant analysis for understanding each man in greater context.

Then, the next several lectures recount the major events in the life of the subject. We will consider the nature of the source material for our biographical sketches and the problems of gaining an historically accurate picture of each. We will attend to some remarkable aspects of their early lives: the claims of their noble lineages; the unusual circumstances surrounding their conception, birth, and family life; and their marital situations. In the life of each, we shall explore the pivotal moments of transformation in which some new insight is gained or new revelation received. Our biographical sketches then close with discussions of their later years and deaths. Throughout these

lectures focused on the events of their lives, we will try to gain a sense of the personal qualities and attributes that made them who they were.

Outlining the life history of each man provides the framework for examining the essential dimensions of their teachings and practices. In expounding the wisdom they offered to their followers, we will be interested in a set of common questions: How did each figure understand the nature of the world and ultimate reality? What assumptions did he make about existence and the nature of the self and society? What did each man envision as the final fulfillment of humanity and human individuals? What ethical and moral principles did he promote and why? Finally, what spiritual disciplines did he practice and teach as a means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate reality?

To wrap up the study of each figure as an individual, we examine the larger reverberations of his life in his immediate context and in world history. The focus of investigation will be principally the development of the religions with which he is associated, but the talk will not be limited to this. For example, we will consider Jesus as an important figure in Islam. I intend to distinguish sharply each individual “founder” (a problematic concept, as I will explain) from the religion he ostensibly establishes.

The final three lectures in the series offer us the opportunity to reflect on these four in comparative perspective and suggest ways in which their examples and teachings can continue to nourish the human spirit. One lecture is devoted mainly to a consideration of the similarities and differences in their personal lives. We will compare their cultural settings and upbringings. The next lecture will examine their teaching and practices. I will argue *against* the common perception that these four (or the religions with which they are associated) simply teach the same thing. The points of divergence are mainly conceptual and theoretical, particularly in their understandings of the nature of ultimate reality and the world. We will also note that in each case these teachers considered the “self” as a prime ingredient in the unhappiness of human beings and taught methods for inculcating humility and compassion for others. The last lecture of the series tries to glean enduring lessons from these four and apply them to the world today. We will mention specifically the ideal of living a “noble” life, of cultivating the qualities of wisdom and

compassion, of allowing the mind to settle and restore itself. We will also consider the implications of this study for addressing the “problem” of religious pluralism. ■

A Quartet of Sages

Lecture 1

What brings me to this study of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad is not simply an historian's interest in their impact on humanity's development ... [but] the same concern that led me to the study of religion and philosophy in the first place: the desire to know how to live life well.

Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad—Whatever your spiritual beliefs, you would be hard pressed to argue against the idea that these four ancient sages were among the most influential humans who ever lived. All four were also some of history's finest teachers of the art of living—living nobly, deliberately, and courageously, with virtue and discipline. Throughout these lectures, we will address both the historical and philosophical significance of these four men and the importance of their lives and teachings for us today.

The overall course structure is twofold: First, we will study each figure separately (and chronologically) in the context of his time and place; second, we will compare their lives and teachings. The historical and cultural framework that informed each man's life and worldview will be the foundation for examining their major life events. We will also look at the available source materials and discuss the problems of obtaining historically accurate profiles of men who lived so long ago. As our discussion progresses, we will notice some remarkable similarities amid the obvious differences among their life stories.

Next we turn to the wisdom each of these sages offered and ask how each understood the nature of the world and ultimate reality—in other words, each man's **metaphysics**. Next we will look at what each had to say about the nature and purpose of humankind, which theologians and philosophers call **anthropology**. (This should not, however, be confused with the independent academic discipline of the same name.) What did each man think about the nature of the self and the fulfillment of humanity? How did he understand humankind's relationship to the world and the ultimate reality?

Following metaphysics and anthropology, we will look at each sage's take on **ethics**—his advocacy of certain moral principles, including how these principles related to the divine or the cosmos. Then we will study their positions on **spiritual discipline**, asking what activities each teacher encouraged as a means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate reality. There is a tendency among theologians and philosophers to focus on their ideas at the expense of their practices; in this course, we will attempt

**The lives of these
four were inextricably
connected to their
teachings.**

to counterbalance that view. Finally, we will examine the reverberations of each sage's life in his immediate context and in world history.

Just as we will begin our examination of each sage's life with a look at his historical and cultural context, so we must be aware of our own contexts and how they affect our approach to the ideas in this course. By necessity, these lectures will be presented through the lens of my own ideas and interests. No one escapes the fact of interpretation, and mine is only one voice in a vast chorus. I encourage you, therefore, to read the interpretations of others and, more importantly, to read the words of these sages for yourself.

It is also, for the purposes of this course, important that we set aside as much as possible the view that each of these four men is regarded as the founder of a major world religion. Describing Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad as religious “founders” may distort our understanding of the way they thought of their own lives; recall that some of these figures are associated with religions other than the ones they ostensibly founded. Furthermore, our purpose is not to evaluate any of them on the basis of what we think about the religion that developed in his wake. We do not deny the special claims of each group of followers about these sages, but the focus of our study will be their human lives and on their vocations as teachers of wisdom and compassion.

The final part of this course will offer us the opportunity to reflect on Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad from a comparative perspective and to discern ways in which their examples and teachings can continue to nourish the human spirit. Were these sages actually saying the

same thing, as many today would like to believe? If not, can we resolve their differences to help our pursuit of the ideal life? We will see the one point on which they all seem to agree: that self-centeredness thwarts the happiness and well-being of humans. In the last lecture, we will try to garner enduring lessons from these four sages' wisdom for cultivating humility and compassion for others. ■

Important Terms

anthropology: The philosophical or theological study of the universal nature of humanity, as well as the meaning and purpose (if any) of human existence.

ethics: The study of morality and proper human behavior.

metaphysics: The study of the fundamental character and qualities of reality, including the origin of the universe and the nature of the divine.

spiritual discipline: A set of practices designed as a part of the means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate reality.

Question to Consider

1. What is the difference between studying the lives of these four sages from the perspective of a follower of a particular religion and the perspective we are trying to adopt for this course? What are some difficulties a believer might encounter with this approach? How can these difficulties be overcome?

Confucius's China

Lecture 2

When Confucius reflected on his cultural identity, he thought not only of his immediate era but the whole of its past as well. For Confucius, the past was profoundly significant and simply could not be separated from the present.

By the time of Confucius, China was already an ancient civilization, which its inhabitants referred to by many names, including **Huáxià**—“grand florescence” or “illustrious blossoming.” The ancient Chinese identified themselves not as citizens of a state but as participants in a particular—and particularly refined—way of life. They also referred to their world as **Zhōngguó**, “the central kingdom,” a term both literal and metaphorical: They thought of themselves as the center of civilization, and the ruling Zhōu dynasty governed from a kingdom near the Yellow River Valley at the heart of numerous vassal states.

Ancient Chinese cultural identity embraced the whole of the past as well as its present, the ancient and the contemporary. One can observe this characteristic in ancestor reverence, a fundamental religious practice throughout Chinese history in which the dead are treated as still existent and significant in everyday life. Confucius would have regarded our modern, Western, rather cavalier attitude toward the past as both a symptom and a cause of the sorry state of the world. This attitude, incidentally, sets Confucius apart from the other three sages we will discuss in this course.

The Yellow River Valley culture into which Confucius was born dates to about the 5th millennium B.C.E. and is considered one of the cradles of civilization. By approximately 3000 B.C.E., citizens of this area were already practicing elaborate religious rituals and had social hierarchies regulated by patrilineal descent. Chinese tradition recalls this era as an age when the wise and benevolent philosopher-kings of the legendary (and perhaps mythical) Xià dynasty ruled the land. The Xià were followed by the kings of the Shang dynasty, whose rule began in the 16th or 15th century B.C.E. Most of our tangible evidence from this period comes from “dragon bones,” or oracle

bones: inscribed pieces of cow bone and tortoise shell used in divination. From these inscriptions, we know the Shang revered the dead; we know they valued properly performed rituals; we know they believed that the kingdom's welfare hung on the king's good relations with the spirit realm; and we know Shang armies fought frequent wars with neighboring realms and steppe nomads. These four concerns—ancestor worship, ritual behavior, the king's responsibilities toward his subjects, and the ethics of war and peace—would later figure heavily in Confucius's writings.

Around 1045 B.C.E., the Shang rulers were deposed by the Zhōu dynasty, which ruled for the next 800 years. Their first king, Wen, is credited as one of the creators of the book of divination called the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*. But for Confucius, the most significant figure was Wen's son Dàn, usually known as the Duke of Zhōu. The duke was never king himself but faithfully served as his nephew's regent. For this selflessness, he was regarded as a paragon of leadership and moral behavior by many Chinese, including Confucius. The duke is also credited with creating the concept of *tiānmìng*, the mandate of heaven—that is, the ruler governed with divine sanction as long as he was virtuous; therefore, opposing and even deposing a poor king could be morally justified. The mandate of heaven assumed a critical role throughout Chinese history up until the 20th century.



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The Duke of Zhōu is credited with creating the concept of *tiānmìng*, the mandate of heaven.

Despite the Zhōu rulers' claims of virtue, in reality the Zhōu period was a turbulent era marked by invasion, lawlessness, and civil war. Political power became invested in local hegemony, or warlords. The final stage of the Zhōu

period is called the **Period of Warring States**. By now, the nature of war itself was changing: Chariot warfare conducted by aristocrats was replaced by mounted cavalry and a conscripted peasant infantry. Military leadership was allotted the skilled, not the well-born. The political chaos engendered rapid social changes as well. Increasingly, the nobility (of which Confucius was a member) were required to prove themselves by talent and hard work. Government bureaucracy increased, and the new meritocracy offered opportunities to the peasant class, including land ownership.

The Period of Warring States was also known as the Period of One Hundred Schools because it was an immensely creative period both philosophically and religiously—a logical response of the intellectual class to the turmoil. (One of the themes we will return to is how our sages all lived and taught in times of immense political or cultural ferment.) Philosophy revolved around the question of human harmony. Although the issue is practical and material, it involved deeper questions and assumptions about reality, human nature, and the purposes of human life. Confucianism was one of the many voices in this debate.

Although Confucius was addressing the specific problems of his day, I contend they were not all that different from the problems of the eras that followed his, including our own. ■

Important Terms

Huáxià: Literally, “grand florescence” or “illustrious blossoming”; one of ancient Chinese culture’s names for itself, implying a sense of cultural superiority.

Period of Warring States: The last phase of the Zhōu dynasty, during which great social and political unrest led to a flourishing of Chinese philosophy and religion.

tīānmìng: Literally, “the mandate of heaven”; the Chinese belief that the right to rule is conferred by the gods on virtuous leaders and removed by the gods from the corrupt, which implies the right of the people to rebel against and depose a leader who is not morally upright.

Zhōngguó: Literally, “central kingdom”; a name for the ancient Chinese kingdom that grew up in the Yellow River Valley under the Zhōu dynasty.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think that social and political upheaval under the Zhōu led to more philosophical and religious debate, rather than more unity? Can you think of other times and places in human history where this has occurred?
2. Confucius's response to his troubled culture was in part to look to the past—the good old days. Have we seen this response in Western history as well? Can we detect this attitude in the philosophy and religion of the present day?

Becoming a Sage

Lecture 3

Sīmǎ Qiān's biography ... must therefore be regarded with a healthy dose of suspicion, since it recounts the life of an individual who lived four centuries earlier. ... Nevertheless [it helps] us understand how the example of Confucius was understood by many Chinese, even if that portrayal does not precisely correspond to the historical Confucius.

Confucius and his way of thought have a place of privilege in the Chinese world as the fountainhead of Chinese culture and philosophy, but for most of his life, Confucius was a virtual unknown. His given name was **Kongqiū**; the name “Confucius” is a latinization of **K’ung-fu-tzu**, meaning “Mister K’ung.” Throughout Chinese history, however, he has often simply been called the Sage. What we can say with confidence about the historical Confucius is limited. We have no documents about him written during his lifetime and no writing in his own hand. All of our sources come from others’ memories—sometimes second- or third-hand memories—so we have to approach them with a skeptical eye.

Although a minority of scholars have suggested that Confucius is a composite of several ancient sages, most believe he was an authentic historical figure. Sīmǎ Qiān, a court historian of the Han dynasty, wrote the first biography of Confucius about 400 years after the Sage’s death; its late date and political ramifications for the Confucian Han court must color our reading. The best source for glimpsing the real Confucius is the *Analects* (in Chinese, the *Lunyu*), but in terms of biography, it has little to report. It is a collection of aphorisms, conversations, and anecdotes compiled by Confucius’s disciples after his death; their brief and sometimes cryptic nature has helped shape the popular Western image of Confucius as an old man uttering wisdom and riddles. There is no consensus among modern historians about how much of the *Analects* is historically reliable. Contradictions within the text suggest that many hands were involved in its composition. Only the first half of the book is generally regarded as reflecting the thought and words of Confucius himself, but others grant that status to less or even none of the text.

The time-honored (if not universally accepted) dates for Confucius's lifetime are 551 B.C.E. to 479 B.C.E. Sīmǎ Qiān claims that Confucius was descended from the royal family of the state of Song, one of the principalities of the early Zhōu dynasty. He tells us that Confucius's great-grandfather fled Song for the state of Lu, which had been established by the Duke of Zhōu. There the family fell on hard times from which they never recovered. Confucius was conceived (possibly out of wedlock) in a field, and his parents prayed for his conception at a sacred mountain. Interestingly, the name "Kong" can be translated as "gratitude for an answered prayer" and "Qiu" as "hill," so we might suspect the story is simply a clever play on his name. The important point is that an unusual conception has been accepted as part of Confucius's life story for over 2,000 years.



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Confucius's teaching style was most likely informal, allowing specific situations to provide the occasion for a particular lesson.

The facts of his youth are as murky as those of his birth. His father likely died when he was a toddler, and his mother raised him in poverty. Tradition tells us he was born with a concavity on the crown of his head and in adulthood was uncommonly tall. Sīmǎ says as a boy he enjoyed pretending to officiate at mock rituals. The *Analects* says he was "skilled in many menial things," meaning he likely accepted many lowly jobs in his youth. But he was entitled to an education by virtue of his social standing as part of the emerging *shi*, or common gentlemen, situated between the declining nobility and the common peasantry. He was an eager and dedicated

student, and we may assume he was schooled in all or most of the “six arts” of ancient China: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics. Ritual and music would later figure prominently in his philosophy and teaching.

Confucius not only loved learning, but he seems to have discovered the importance of mindfulness in the process of learning. He expected his students to share his love of learning and practice the discipline of paying attention: “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak.”

We know Confucius was a father and husband, and there are suggestions in the early literature that his marriage ended in divorce. Familial relationships were an important aspect of Confucian ethics, so our lack of details on his family life is frustrating. As we begin to consider the similarities and differences among our four sages toward the end of the course, we will return to the question of marriage and reflect on its bearing on their lives and teachings. ■

Important Terms

Kongqiū: Confucius’s given name. “Kong” translates loosely to “gratitude for an answered prayer” and “qiū” translates to “hill.”

K’ung-fu-tzu: Literally, “Mister K’ung”; the honorific that was Latinized into “Confucius.”

Lunyu: The Chinese name of Confucius’s *Analects*.

“If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again.”
— *Analects* 7.8

Questions to Consider

1. Imagine you are a historian researching an ancient notable like Confucius. What sort of clues would you look for when trying to determine the authenticity of a story or text about your subject?
2. How important do you think mindfulness is to the learning process? What are the aids and barriers to mindfulness in modern educational environments?

A Gentleman and a Scholar

Lecture 4

Confucius believed that the pursuit of virtue by leaders—whether of the state or of the family—had salutary ramifications throughout the collective body. ... For legends to suggest that when Confucius assumed office the world became a much better place would be quite consistent with this belief.

The *Analects* and other sources provide us with more and better information about the last quarter of Confucius's life than we have about his first 50 years. We have noted how his love of learning distinguished him from others in his situation, and his study of the texts of Huáxià culture was to influence both his thinking and his success. By his late 20s, he was recognized as an authority on history, ritual, and music, and served as an occasional ceremonial consultant to several rulers and aristocratic families. In his 30s, he began teaching the classics to male students from all walks of life; he only required that his students be zealous learners like he was. What Confucius taught was gentlemanly conduct, how to comport oneself to best serve the state and hence one's fellow humans. But it was not until he was nearly 50 that Confucius became a state official himself.

His first appointment was as Deputy Minister of Public Works, followed shortly by his selection as Minister of Crime. His tenure was fairly unremarkable, although Xunzi, one of his early interpreters, and Sīmā Qiān both claimed his appointment triggered a new wave of morality throughout the province, driven almost solely by his reputation. While such stories are surely exaggerations, they highlight Confucius's belief that the pursuit of virtue by leaders had salutary ramifications throughout the collective body. They also correspond to the image of the Sage in the *Analects*: the paragon of wisdom, compassion, and humility.

Other sources describe Confucius as gentle, benevolent, respectful, frugal, and deferential. He did not consider himself to be the ideal person that others took him to be. To the contrary, he appeared to be more focused on

correcting his deficiencies than displaying his assets. Confucius was also a person capable of great empathy for others, particularly for those who were suffering, and paid keen attention to gestures of respect and courtesy. While these early literary images of Confucius may not have been wholly accurate, they cannot have been wholly disconnected from the person he was.

Piecing together his aphorisms and the impressions of his disciples, [the *Analects*] portrays the Sage as the paragon of wisdom, compassion, and humility.

Confucius's achievements as police commissioner of Lu were modest but not insignificant. He is credited with negotiating the return of Lu lands from an invading neighbor when several military expeditions had already failed. Although

resolution by violence is a last resort in Confucian philosophy, he was not a proponent of total nonviolence. He ordered several executions, including the death of Shaozheng Mao, a fellow teacher of virtue, on the charges of moral pretense and subversion (not unlike the accusations leveled against Socrates and Jesus). Confucius's later interpreters were at pains to reconcile his actions with his teachings on benevolence and the sacredness of human life.

Within four or five years of his ministerial appointment, Confucius resigned and left Lu to seek another master to serve. His reasons are lost to us, but there are some hints that it was a gesture of protest against the corrupting influence of outsiders on Lu's court. Along with an entourage of protégés, he became an itinerant political consultant, wandering from kingdom to kingdom for over a dozen years, never finding a court where he could settle. The travel was arduous and provided good material for later writers to highlight the finer aspects of Confucian attitudes toward suffering, adversity, and the earthly rewards of virtue (or rather, the lack thereof). In fact, Confucius's belief mirrored the Buddha's teaching that nobility does not imply avoidance of adversity but meeting it with an inner resolve and serenity, and like our other three sages, he measured his success not by popularity or acceptance but by more personal criteria—in this case, depth of self-understanding and personal refinement.

By his mid-60s, Confucius was convinced that his work in the world had been sanctioned by the highest realities. He had survived a difficult childhood, travails in the wilderness, and two assassination attempts—once again, not unlike our other three sages. Each had discovered a source of courage rooted in a truth beyond the triumphs and failures of their individual lives. The itinerant years were important in maturing Confucius's thought and the personal qualities that made him so attractive to many, but in the end, he returned to Lu around 484 B.C.E. No longer interested in active political service, he returned to teaching, though occasionally consulting with kings and counselors. In this way—learning and teaching, constantly striving for self-improvement—Confucius occupied himself until the end of his days. ■

Questions to Consider

1. If nobility, in the Confucian sense, is to meet adversity with inner resolve and serenity, what rituals or spiritual practices did Confucius use to help his students develop this trait? How do other faiths, philosophies, and ritual systems define and foster nobility?
2. From what you have heard so far, do you think Confucius taught a particularly strict or challenging philosophy?

Heaven and Earth

Lecture 5

Among our four figures, Confucius is the one who seems to have said the least about metaphysics; he was far more loquacious about human behavior than he was about the basic structure of reality. ... Confucius never denied the existence of spiritual beings, but neither did he make belief in them central to his view.

As with the study of Confucius's life, our investigation into his philosophy and spirituality relies principally on the *Analects*. For all of its brevity, the book is not easy to comprehend. It appears to be little more than a disjointed collection of proverbs and pieces of conversation. To make it accessible, we will look at the text in terms of its various themes. We begin by discussing the basic features and assumptions of Confucian thought, the metaphysics of his worldview.

Among our four figures, Confucius is the one who seems to have said the least about metaphysics. Confucius never denied the existence of spiritual beings, but neither did he make belief in them central to his view. Scattered throughout the *Analects* are references to the principal metaphysical concepts of ancient China. Confucius clearly thought that acknowledging the divine was essential to human welfare.

Like all Chinese of his day, Confucius accepted the ancient belief that reality comprised two worlds, the realm of heaven—*tiān*, the domain of gods, spirits, and ancestors—and the realm of earth—*dì*, the sphere of humans and nature. The many gods and spirits of the universe were thought to be immediately available to human beings, and hence they could be consulted by means of divination and could even enter and possess individuals. Due to this interdependence, the well-being of everyone and everything in them rested on the harmonious relationship between the gods and humans, and preserving this harmony through rituals and sacrifices was one of the king's principal functions.

The Shang imagined *tiān* as a heavenly court that paralleled the royal court on earth. They called the high god **Shang Di**, the Supreme Emperor or the Supreme Ancestor, presiding over a court of lesser divinities, or *shen*, whom the Chinese turned to for help in matters of agriculture, hunting, military campaigns, health, and longevity. The relationships between the ancient Chinese and their gods were formal and rather businesslike. We find no evidence that individuals sought close, personal relationships with the gods, which would have encroached on the dignity of the divine.

The image of *tiān* as a polytheistic heavenly court persisted throughout the Zhōu era, but the idea of heaven became more ambiguous and acquired richer meanings. The Zhōu people initially used the names Shang Di and *tiān* interchangeably. By the time of Confucius, however, *tiān* had assumed the character of an overarching principle or force, somewhat akin to the Western idea of fate. *Tiān* also acquired a moral dimension—at first, mainly an interest in who the ruler was and how he treated his subjects, but by the Spring and Autumn Period, the Chinese believed the will of heaven concerned everyone. Interestingly, this attribution of moral preferences to the divine world was part of a larger process occurring in most of the major centers of civilization during the 1st millennium B.C.E., a period known as the **Axial Age**.



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During the period called the Enlightenment, many intellectuals in Europe

Confucius was an eager and dedicated student. He says in one of the famous passages from the *Analects*, “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning.”

saw Confucius as a fellow rationalist who had articulated a sophisticated, agnostic ethical system. But this reading of the *Analects* neglects the formal, reserved way the Chinese have historically related to their gods and spirits. To advocate maintaining one's distance from the gods is nowhere near the same as professing agnosticism. Yet there is no denying that the role the gods played in his worldview was tangential. We will see that when he promoted ritual veneration of the deities, he did so not to benefit the gods but to evoke specific qualities in human beings. The conception of heaven was more central; he seemed to think of *tiān* as the cosmological reality to which humanity and the gods and spirits are all subject.

Confucius understood heaven as a dynamic, creative reality that gave and supported life on earth, the source of all things and of the processes of change. Although he sometimes described heaven as a kind of fate, it would be a mistake to think that Confucius was fatalistic. He certainly thought it was possible for human beings to resist the will of heaven. Heaven had certain powers but not absolute power. Confucius was unambiguous, though, in his belief that heaven was moral and wanted human beings to be good and that heaven's will for human beings was disclosed not by revealed commandments but in the lives and teachings of the virtuous sages of old. ■

Important Terms

Axial Age: The era of exceptional religious and philosophical creativity during the 1st millennium B.C.E. that gave rise to the world's major religions.

di: In Chinese religion, earth; the material realm.

Shang Di: The supreme god of the ancient Chinese.

shen: The minor deities of ancient Chinese religion.

tiān: In Chinese religion, heaven; the spiritual realm. It was sometimes conceived of as a force and sometimes as a being.

Question to Consider

1. What do you think of the claim that Confucianism is a philosophy, not a religion? What makes a religion a religion?

Doing unto Others

Lecture 6

Confucius believed that attending to the concerns of this world took precedence over understanding the world beyond. But [this] does not suggest that Confucius was only concerned with this world. What it indicates is that attending to the concerns of earth is a prerequisite for comprehending heaven.

Confucius's preference to speak infrequently of heaven is remarkable, and it warrants closer scrutiny. In the *Analects*, a student asks Confucius how to serve the gods and the ancestors. He responds: "You are not able even to serve your fellow humans. How can you ask about the gods and spirits?" When the student asks about death, the Sage says, "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" In other words, we must begin with the things nearest to hand before we approach the things farther away. The ultimate reality is manifested through ordinary things; the higher is revealed through the lower.

Accordingly, Confucius recognized the sacred through humanity and saw humanity as sacred. As with his metaphysical views, Confucius was less than explicit about what he thought of human nature, but he indicated that he believed all persons shared a common nature: "By nature, people are close to one another; through practice, they drift far apart." Even barbarians could become civilized by the adoption of Chinese mores. Confucius did not say whether he considered human nature good or evil, but he clearly thought that it could be fashioned in good or evil ways. We could say that Confucius viewed humans as unfinished beings, whose life's work is to bring ourselves to completion.

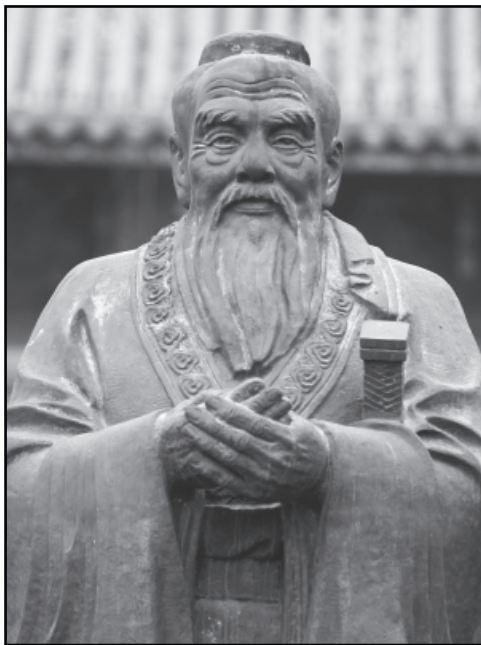
Confucius thought that not only was perfect goodness a human possibility; it was also the will of heaven that we pursue it. Because perfection was the ideal, he helped his followers envision this objective and prescribed specific methods to achieve it—in particular, looking to China's legendary sages as their models.

All told, Confucius mentioned nearly two dozen traits of the morally perfect individual, including respectfulness, refinement, deference, simplicity, and sincerity. The most important among all of them was *ren*, or humaneness. The *Analects* never fully explains the concept of *ren*, but the word is written in Chinese by adding the number 2 to the basic character for “person”—implying that *ren* manifests in interpersonal relationships. Some alternative English translations for *ren* are kindness, benevolence, goodness, compassion, and nobility.

One of the clearest expressions of *ren* is Confucius’s version of the Golden Rule: “What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others.” By using our own likes and dislikes as clues, we may imagine what others desire or seek to avoid. Once we develop a basic sense of what others want and do not want, we must train ourselves to act on that knowledge in a compassionate way. Confucius recognized the barrier to this as what we might call *schadenfreude*—delight in others’ failures—

and thought it a major obstacle to realizing our full humanity. The full expression of *ren* is accomplished only through great discipline.

Confucius also used the language of love to help his followers understand *ren*, but to connect *ren* and the English word “love” might be misleading. *Ren* did not mean to love everyone equally. Since our parents have given us the priceless gift of life, he said we are obligated to love and care for



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Confucius’s fundamental spiritual practice involved taking the past as the guide to, and the standard for, living in the present.

them most of all—consistent with the Chinese traditions of **filial piety** and ancestor worship. In fact, Confucius thought that filiality was not only the most natural form of love but the very basis of all forms of loving. The person of noble humanity next extends love to the members of his or her immediate family, then to the extended family and to friends, to the village, the province, and on to the whole world, all with decreasing intensity.

In spite of the deeply troubled times in which he lived, Confucius had the audacity to believe that human beings were perfectible.

Confucius discussed other characteristics of the perfected person throughout his teachings, often as character types, such as the sage, the good man, and the complete

man, which were each associated with particular stations in society. The ideal type he stressed above all others was the *jūnzi*, the “gentleman” or “superior man.” The *jūnzi* was not the highest ideal (that was the sage), but it was the ideal for those destined for a political career. The *jūnzi* had attained a noble character and superior status by hard work and self-cultivation. His hallmarks were humaneness, generosity, reciprocity, filiality, and wisdom—that is, being a good judge of character, possessing self-knowledge, and thinking for oneself. Finally, just as the *jūnzi* displays impartiality in his dealings with others, he practices equanimity with respect to all circumstances of his life.

As we noted before, some of Confucius’s followers found this path a hard one to walk. Striving for goodness is a lifelong process, and in the end it may not be attained. Those who take the path of cultivating goodness must do so for its own sake and not for any other reason. ■

Important Terms

filial piety: The practice of revering and honoring one’s parents both during their lives and after their deaths. To Confucius, filiality was the root of all forms of love.

***jūnzi*:** The gentleman; in Confucian thought, this character type is the ideal for a life of political service.

ren: Humaneness; in Confucianism, the chief virtue of the morally perfect individual.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Confucius's view of human beings as incomplete but perfectible compare with Western ideas of human nature, both modern and ancient?
2. Do you agree with Confucius that filial love is the root of all love? Why or why not?

How to Rule a Kingdom

Lecture 7

Confucian political philosophy shared some things with Legalism and Daoism but differed from them in several important ways. Like the Daoists, Confucius believed the solution to China's problems lay in the rulers' pursuit of the virtuous life. But Confucius had a different idea about how virtue was to be cultivated.

Among our four sages, Confucius had perhaps the greatest conviction about the importance of the political dimension of human existence. Despite his own meager achievements in the political realm, from his early adulthood until the end of his life, Confucius thought about, taught about, and trained his protégés in the art of governing.

Confucianism was only one of many Chinese philosophies in the latter half of the 1st millennium B.C.E. to offer opinions on governance. **Legalism** sought to make the ruler's authority more absolute. It was the ancient Chinese version of a political philosophy manifested throughout history in a variety of forms and championed by the likes of Machiavelli and Mao Zedong. It regards the interests of the state as paramount and protects those interests through terror and violence. On the opposite end of the spectrum, **Daoism** contended that overregulation and governmental heavy-handedness, along with the self-centeredness of the ruling class, were the real sources of China's malaise. Daoist philosophers contended that those at the top of the social hierarchy were obliged to curtail their extravagance and live simply. The early Daoists believed that the world would be an infinitely better place if the rulers would simply stay out of other people's lives.

Like the Daoists, Confucius believed the solution to China's problems lay in the rulers' pursuit of the virtuous life. But the Daoists thought virtue came naturally by following the way of nature, whereas Confucius believed it had to be nurtured with ritual and decorum. Confucius shared Legalism's appreciation for order and hierarchy, but he disdained legislation and the use of fear as a tactic to enforce social harmony. In contrast to both schools, Confucius believed governments should exist to promote the moral well-

being of all citizens and facilitate each person's pursuit of completeness. Confucius's sage-kings and gentleman-officials would rule their subjects primarily through instruction and example rather than legislation and enforcement.

The ancient Chinese always saw laws as human products, subject to human flaws, and Confucius was particularly sensitive to the potential deficiency of human legal systems. He preferred to allow morally qualified persons to judge what is right or wrong in particular cases while longing for the day when litigation would not be necessary. But most importantly, Confucius resisted rule by laws that appeal to fear, not to the better part of our natures. Virtue, rather than law, was the Confucian ideal.

**Virtue, rather than law,
was the Confucian ideal.**

The word virtue is the usual English translation for the Chinese term *de*. Not only was *de* thought to be virtue; it was also regarded as a force or power through which the virtuous could transform others. Witnessing *de* evoked *bao*, the natural wish to respond to a kindness with kindness. Thus virtue in a ruler could transform the whole state.

The Confucian view of society did suggest a rather passive role for the masses. Confucius believed in a government for the people but not by the people. Commoners were also expected to participate in the well-being of society by living virtuous lives. Appropriate behavior in society followed the same patterns and values as life in the family. Practicing filiality was well within everyone's ability and strengthened not only the family but the world at large. Thus moral charisma could flow upward as well as down.

If the most important component for ruling a kingdom was the ruler's personal moral character, then the next ingredient was the practice of ritual, or *li*. In the Shang and early Zhōu dynasties, ritual was understood primarily as the performance of sacrifice and divination; simply going through the motions was sufficient. Later, *li* came to include the sense of reverence and sincerity on the part of the ritual's participants. Confucius took this a step further by connecting it with the quality of humaneness: Ritual was an act performed not primarily to please divine beings but to shape the moral character of the

participants and observers. Furthermore, Confucius expanded *li* to include manners and etiquette.

Proper performance of ritual evoked humaneness through requiring the performer's knowledge, discipline, and self-restraint as well as by inducing his reverence, gratitude, and humility. Rituals also created a sense of the interconnectedness of humanity and divinity, providing a reminder that one was part of a vast web of interdependent relationships involving heaven, earth, and humanity. Confucius was confident that returning to the serious practice of the ancient rites would restore harmony among the people more surely than the enactment and enforcement of laws. ■

Important Terms

bao: The impulse to respond to kindness with kindness.

Daoism: An ancient Chinese school of thought that stressed the naturalness of virtue and the value of living simply.

de: Virtue; also, moral charisma.

Legalism: An ancient Chinese school of thought that favored absolutism and the welfare of the state above the welfare of the people.

li: The practice of ritual; according to Confucius, this also encompasses etiquette.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you measure virtue in your leaders? Which foibles or flaws are forgivable, and which are beyond the pale? How do these character traits relate to good (or bad) governance?
2. In your own faith tradition or philosophical practice, how important is your state of mind or heart when approaching a ritual? Must one always be fully invested, or is there a perceived value in “going through the motions”?

What a Sage Does

Lecture 8

Confucius thought that becoming a sage was within the grasp of everyone. But he never said it would be easy. ... At most, those on the way—or the rare individual who reached the destination—could enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that they had lifted themselves above the common lot and pursued the purpose for which humanity had been intended.

We have been looking at the conceptual dimensions of Confucius's philosophy, but in fact the Sage intended his teachings to be implemented and practiced, not merely pondered and evaluated. We turn now to Confucian spiritual discipline, the exercises and activities he promoted as steps along the path toward human fulfillment, however that might be understood.

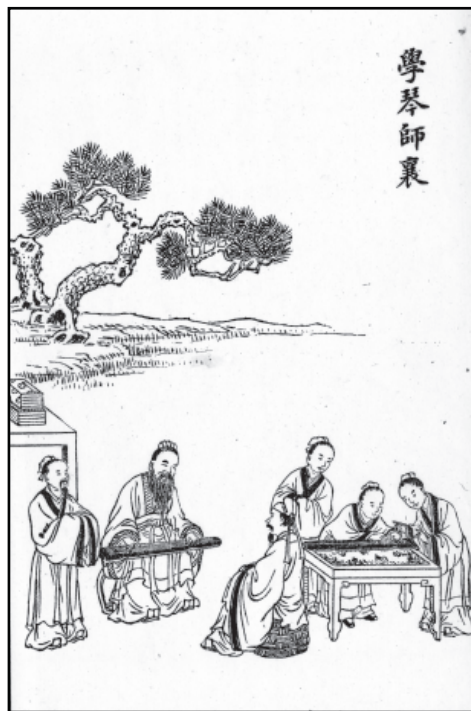
We should not think of “discipline” in the sense of “punishment,” although some spiritual disciplines can be hard to bear, and some can serve a corrective function. Spiritual disciplines are not imposed but voluntary. Motivation must come from within. The nature of the spiritual path (or *dao* in Confucian terms), furthermore, is such that one is destined to fail before one succeeds. Failure, in fact, is essential to following any spiritual path. Failure is required because the real strength of spirit is achieved when one has to find the gumption to get on the straight path yet again. In other words, it is the practice that makes perfect.

Confucian spiritual discipline is best understood in terms of the impediments to living a virtuous life. Foremost is self-centeredness, which Confucius thought carried destructive consequences for others as well as oneself because humaneness is a virtue manifested in interpersonal relationships. Ignorance is another obstruction to humaneness; it might cause us to act rashly, to resort to violence, to speak an unkind word, or to neglect the humanity that connects us to one another. The practices of Confucian spirituality functioned to disable these obstacles and to train individuals in more wholesome ways.

As far as we know, Confucius never provided his apprentices with a step-by-step program for attaining moral perfection, but certain themes recur throughout the *Analects*. The fundamental practices endorsed by Confucius, and many other great teachers throughout history, focus on restraining desires. Confucius admonished his students to live simply, without ostentation or luxury. You will not find Confucius promoting hair shirts or self-flagellation, but he did think that a little discomfort kept the mind attentive to itself and sensitive to the wider world.

Confucius also promoted self-awareness through introspection, which he called **quiet sitting**. The purpose of such times was not to commune with the divine but to serve as opportunities for critical self-examination and refining the faculty of **keen discernment**—forestalling reflexive actions to obtain a clearer understanding of one's limitations and abilities and to fine-tune one's listening and speaking skills. Without the self-awareness nurtured in introspection, thought Confucius, one is not fit to serve in government.

Where other great teachers may have called for a radical disregard for the things of this world, Confucius urged a radical engagement with them. Attending to such things as clothing, food, and even posture gave expression to one's respect for the social fabric and helped foster a greater awareness of the sacred dimension within all things. Confucius thought the



Especially fond of music, Confucius often sang and played the *qin* with his followers.

whole of life ought to be conducted as a grand ritual. In all interpersonal relationships, human beings ought to comport themselves with the same poise and decorum appropriate to a sacred ceremony. Observing good manners means to act in a clearly prescribed way that is considerate of the feelings of others, and—this is the important part—to do so whether you feel like it or not. Confucius thought that continual practice of mannerly acts could engender sincere feelings in the one who performs them. You may not feel particularly humble, but after several thousand bows and prostrations, feelings of genuine humility begin to surface. As character is shaped by behavior, the performance of humane acts becomes natural and spontaneous.

A sophisticated enjoyment of music, poetry, and dance was also an important dimension of Confucian spirituality. Confucius thought that the cultured arts had the capacity to awaken and refine moral sensitivities. The *Analects* does not tell us exactly what it was about music that appealed to Confucius. Perhaps he valued music's ability to express and arouse moods and feelings appropriate for encouraging humaneness. We can also imagine how musical harmonies and coordinated dances would have reminded Confucius of the ideal of harmony between heaven and earth, ruler and subject, husband and wife. But Confucius also feared that music and dance could debase and disrupt humanity, particularly by inciting lust. Confucius therefore believed it was morally necessary to apply thoughtful control over the kinds of entertainments one attends.

In a more general sense, Confucius was concerned about the choices we make about our environment that might have an impact on our character. That concern extended to the people with whom we are friends: Those aspiring to be gentlemen should not enter the domain of someone who continually acted in an immoral way.

Confucian spirituality was nothing if not comprehensive. It involved disciplined attention to all aspects of life and concerned the person as an individual and the individual within a nexus of relationships. It sought to bring humanity to completion and harmony between heaven and earth. ■

Important Terms

dao: The Chinese term for “path” or “way,” as in a spiritual discipline.

keen discernment: The Confucian term for forestalling reflexive actions to obtain a clearer understanding of one’s limitations and abilities.

quiet sitting: The Confucian term for introspection or meditative practice.

Questions to Consider

1. How comfortable are you with the idea of failure as a prerequisite to success on a spiritual path?
2. What are your personal or cultural daily rituals, and how do they help or hinder your own spiritual development?

Confucius and Confucianism

Lecture 9

Two of the most important early Confucian philosophers, Mencius and Xunzi ... came to what appear to be diametrically opposite positions about the nature of human beings. Exploring the substance of their debate will help us appreciate the way the teachings of individuals like Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad can be subject to such a range of understandings that often lead to sectarian divisions among their followers.

Preserving the memory and teachings of Confucius was not a simple matter of writing down what he had said and done. His students naturally had somewhat different recollections of his life and teachings and different senses about what his words and actions meant. Case in point, two of the most important early Confucian philosophers, Mencius and Xunzi, came to what appear to be diametrically opposite positions about the nature of human beings.

The 4th-century B.C.E. scholar Mencius was likely the most important Confucian thinker next to Confucius himself. He was most interested in the basic make-up of human beings. Confucius thought that all persons shared a common nature by birth but were molded in different ways. But Confucius did not say whether our common nature was naturally good or bad. Mencius, in response to philosophers such as Yang Zhu, who argued that all human actions are driven solely by self-interest, maintained that human nature was innately good. Our innate virtue, to Mencius, is like seedlings rooted in the fertile soil of human nature. Failing to care for and nurture these tender seedlings causes them to wither and die. People were not naturally evil, but they became evil when their upbringing and education neglected or thwarted moral cultivation.

Mencius also helped clarify some of the religious elements implicit in Confucius's teaching. Confucius had indicated that he considered himself commissioned by heaven to teach the way of virtue; Mencius took that idea one step further to suggest that heaven has endowed all human beings with

virtue, and our proper response is to serve heaven by bringing our humane qualities to their fullness. Thus, following the way of heaven is the ultimate purpose of existence and empowers humans to participate in the very transformation of the universe.

Working with the same Confucian teachings and in the same context of rigorous philosophical dialogue, the 3rd-century philosopher Xunzi came to the opposite conclusion. He claimed that human beings were born with a tendency toward **waywardness**—an inclination to act in self-serving and self-pleasing ways. This

is not evil per se but simply nonmoral, an outgrowth of the basic drive of self-preservation. Like Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi considered rituals and social etiquette to be the principal ways of fostering benevolence. But unlike Mencius and perhaps Confucius himself, Xunzi did not think of rituals and manners as expressions of human nature but as artificial constructs designed by the ancient sages to benefit people living in society. Nor did Xunzi believe that heaven willed for humans to be moral. Heaven was merely the natural world, which had no moral preferences whatsoever. The way was not mandated in heaven but in human societies that deemed morality essential to their survival and well-being.

Although Mencius and Xunzi held different understandings about the nature of the divine and human, both valued moral education that emphasized the study of tradition and ritual. Both also thought human beings were morally perfectible. The major difference was that Mencius considered education to



Throughout his adult life, Confucius had a single and very lofty ambition: to restore moral vision and virtue to the world.

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be akin to nurturing a field of wild wheat, and Xunzi thought of it more like throwing a clay jar on a potter's wheel.

Generations of disciples who entered government service spread the ideals of Confucianism throughout the royal courts of China. Philosophers from other traditions began to offer their criticisms, as in the *Zhuangzi*, the great satirical classic of the Daoist tradition. But even as the authors of the *Zhuangzi* mocked Confucius, they sometimes used his character to give voice to the Daoist perspective. In other words, the Sage's reputation had grown to such an extent that other philosophers were using his good name to express their own points of view.

When the Qin dynasty came to power in 221 B.C.E., its rulers embraced Legalism and outlawed all other philosophical schools. Many Confucian texts were destroyed and well over a thousand Confucian scholars were tortured and killed. In 206 B.C.E., the Qin dynasty was succeeded by the Han dynasty, which made Confucianism the official state philosophy. The official canon of Confucian classics known as the Wu Jing formed the core curriculum for Chinese education and the basis for civil service exams from the mid-Han period until 1911, about 2,000 years.

In much of the modern era, the reputation of Confucian philosophy steadily declined. Many Chinese intellectuals blamed its conservatism for the tragic events of the 19th century. The Communist Party portrayed Confucius and Confucianism as quaint, backward, and antirevolutionary. Although Mao Zedong did much to eradicate Confucianism in China, in the post-Mao era, Confucianism seems to be enjoying renewed interest among Chinese and others around the world. ■

Important Terms

waywardness: An inclination to act in self-serving and self-pleasing ways, born of one's innate drive of self-preservation.

***Zhuangzi*:** The great satirical classic of the Daoist tradition that mocked Confucius but also featured him as a character espousing Daoist views.

Question to Consider

1. Which do you find more convincing, Mencius's argument that humans are essentially virtuous or Xunzi's argument that humans are essentially amoral? What is your reasoning?

India at the Time of the Buddha

Lecture 10

The new thoughts that disrupted Indian religion began to surface around 800 B.C.E., some 300 years before the birth of Siddhattha Gotama. Near this time, small coteries of intellectuals in northeastern India began to think seriously about death and its aftermath in response to increasing anxiety about the ultimate human destiny. ... The anxiety about death was prompted by the emerging sense of the self as an individual.

By 1500 B.C.E., the Āryans had started to migrate into the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia by way of Iran, bringing with them their vast oral tradition, the Vedas; their native language, Sanskrit; and a stratified social arrangement, the varna system. The early Āryans had not been not especially troubled by death; religious practices were intended to help secure the goods of the world that could make life here and now more comfortable and pleasurable. But by about 800 B.C.E., small coteries of intellectuals had begun to think seriously about death and its aftermath, prompted by an emerging sense of the self.

Gradually, one view of the afterlife began to dominate Āryan culture: The individual's death would be followed by another birth, then another life and death, and another birth, and so on. This transmigration of the soul, or **samsāra**, was a novel idea; the Vedas had suggested nothing like this. Conjectures about how and why this series of deaths and births occurred varied widely, but virtually everyone accepted that it did occur and that it was a highly *undesirable* situation.

Yoked with **samsāra** was the concept of **karma**, which ethicized the Indian view of rebirth. This ancient Āryan term originally referred to the mechanism by which rituals were understood to operate. It later came to mean action in a more generic sense, including any thought or word as well as any deed. But even more, karma referred to the consequences of the act. Karmic acts could be either good or bad, determined by whether or not they conformed to **dharma**, or truth, the duties incumbent on persons according to caste and gender. Fulfilling one's dharma was the way to produce positive

karma; neglecting or violating dharma resulted in negative karma, and the consequences of karmic acts eventually returned to the agent in the form of good or bad events. The events of one's life were not predetermined by fate or a god; human beings determined their own destinies.

Since one does not always reap the consequences of one's actions in this life—after all, the wicked often prosper, while the good often suffer—ancient Indian thought extended the possibilities for karma's return into future lives. Good or evil acts led to favorable or unfavorable rebirths, raising or lowering one's place in the hierarchy of being. From the samsāric perspective, existence now had but one valid objective: to achieve freedom from the endless cycle of death and rebirth, from the suffering of an eternal parade of lives and deaths. The Hindus called this **moksha**, absolute and unconditional liberation. But attaining release from samsāra could not be accomplished merely by generating good karma. Even if one were the finest person possible, eventually one's store of good karma would be depleted, and one would at last face another death and rebirth. In the long run, rebirth itself would have to be brought to an end.



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Born as Siddhartha Gautama in a princely family, the man known as the Buddha left his family's palace and took up the life of an Indian ascetic.

As this new understanding of human nature and destiny gained wide acceptance throughout northern India, it provoked a vast movement of individuals who decided to forsake their connections with the material world to seek final liberation from samsāra. They were called **samanas**, or strivers. They experimented with an immense array of disciplines and doctrines. Many wandered about northern India searching out new teachers and new

spiritual techniques. Some isolated themselves in caves or deep within the forest. They all lived in self-imposed poverty, frequently owning only a bowl for begging food.

One scriptural legacy of the *samanas* is the sacred Hindu text called the *Upanishads*. This diverse collection of philosophical treatises and parables, written over several centuries, concentrates on three fundamental matters: the nature of the *ātman* (the self or soul), the nature of **Brahman** (ultimate reality), and the relationship between them. From its somewhat vague Āryan origins, the concept of *ātman* had developed into an eternal entity residing in but separate from the body and mind. Brahman was held to be a single, indivisible reality that could not be adequately explained or comprehended by ordinary means but could be partially known through the images of the many gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. In the later *Upanishads*, the sages expressed their conviction that the soul and the ultimate reality were in fact, identical: Brahman-*ātman*. The source of human anguish on the wheel of *samsāra* was a consequence of ignorance, a complete misunderstanding about the true nature of the self and reality.

Such were the essential features of the intellectual religious world into which Siddhattha Gotama was born. He lived in a time of spiritual and religious questioning, when traditions were being reevaluated, and the basic questions of existence were receiving exhilarating new answers. ■

Important Terms

ātman: The Hindu term for the self or soul.

Brahman: The name of the ultimate reality in Hinduism.

dharma: Literally, “truth”; in Hinduism, the duties incumbent on persons according to caste and gender.

karma: In Hinduism, action and its consequences, specifically their ethical dimension.

moksha: In Hinduism, release from samsāra, equivalent to nibbana in Buddhism.

samana: An ancient Hindu ascetic.

samsāra: Literally “meandering”; the Hindu term for the transmigration of the soul, suggesting an aimless, meaningless process.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think is the connection between an emerging cultural concept of the self and increasing interest in questions of death and the afterlife?
2. From what we have covered so far, compare and contrast the Confucian and early Hindu views on knowledge, desire, and metaphysics as they relate to the potential for human perfection.

Siddhattha Gotama

Lecture 11

None of the other three teachers in our course has even a remotely similar biography. Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad all started out with little and accomplished their feats in spite of their humble beginnings. Only the Buddha began with everything and chose to give it all up.

Prince Siddhattha Gotama was born and raised with every possible advantage, but he was also sheltered. On the advice of his astrologers, Gotama's father, King Suddhodana, made sure Gotama was shielded from all that was distressing or unpleasant in this world, lest the soft-hearted prince renounce his crown to become a holy man. But despite his father's efforts, Gotama slipped away from his confinement. In short order, he saw for the first time a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. Then he met a *samana* who, despite his poverty and the ills of the world, was serene and happy. Gotama thus decided to give up his life of privilege and seek real happiness.

The stories of the Buddha's life and teachings did not appear in writing until several centuries after his death, and like our other three sages, he left no writings in his own hand. According to tradition, three months after the Buddha's death, 500 of his senior students gathered in the town of Rājagaha on the Gangetic Plain of India to decide how best to preserve his teachings for future generations. The monk Ānanda, who had served as the Buddha's personal attendant and was known for his astounding memory, was invited to recite to the assembly his recollection of the Buddha's many discourses. Another monk, Upāli, recollected the rules of community discipline that the Buddha set out for his followers. After the recitations of both monks, their declamations were validated by all present. From that moment forward, the **sangha**, the community of monks and nuns, preserved the discourses and rules of discipline by memorization.

These works were finally written down sometime in the 1st century B.C.E. in the Pāli language, a vernacular closely related to Sanskrit but developed

specifically for the purpose of preserving the Buddha's teachings. This Pāli Canon is our best resource for historically reliable information about the Buddha's life. As with the *Analects* of Confucius, we cannot be absolutely certain that these texts report historical fact, but there is good reason to believe that the Pāli sources are founded on historical events and contain the substance of the Buddha's teachings.

**The story of King
Suddhodana's over-
protectiveness can be read
as a cautionary tale about the
dangers of ignorance.**

The Pāli Canon is large, a lot larger than the comparable sources we have for Confucius and Jesus. It is split into three divisions, or baskets.

The first basket, called the **suttas**, claims to be the record of Ānanda's memories and contains well over 5,000 discourses. The second, called the **vinaya**, purports to be based on Upāli's recitation of communal regulations. The third is called the **abhidhamma**, a highly abstract and systematic presentation of the Buddha's philosophy.

Until recently, most scholars had set the Buddha's birth in or near 563 B.C.E. Today, they are inclined to place it closer to the death of Confucius, somewhere near 490 B.C.E. He was born into the warrior varna in an area occupied by the Āryan Sākyas clan in present-day Nepal, near its border with India. The legend of his birth—of which there were several versions—clearly moves the narrative into the realm of the mythic, touching on Gotama's various previous reincarnations, fable-like stories collected as the *Jataka* tales. In his penultimate life, he became a god in the Heaven of the Contented, where he dwelled for hundreds of thousands of years until deciding that the people of **Jambudvīpa**, an ancient name for India, would be receptive to the message of a Buddha. His conception and birth were attended by gods and celestial beings under auspicious stars, and he was born in full awareness, immediately taking seven steps and declaring that he had been born for the benefit of the world and would never experience birth again.

Obviously, most of this story is ahistorical and unverifiable. As far as his earthly experience, it is unlikely he was born a prince; at the time, the region was ruled by councils of elders, so his father was likely a high-ranking

councillor, not a king. In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha did not say that his father tried to keep him confined and unsullied but did say he was well-to-do and pampered. The story's embellishments served an important purpose as literary expressions of the Buddha's teachings. They illustrate that the things almost all of us crave cannot possibly give us the kind of satisfaction and happiness we really want. ■

Important Terms

abhidhamma: The systematic presentation of the Buddha's teachings; part of the Pāli Canon.

Jambudvīpa: An ancient name for India.

sangha: The Buddhist community of monks and nuns.

sutta: A discourse of the Buddha; part of the Pāli Canon.

vinaya: The Buddhist monastic rule; part of the Pāli Canon.

Question to Consider

1. Studies have shown that oral transmission of stories can be remarkably accurate in cultures without a written tradition. How well do you think the Pāli Canon could have survived the 400 years between the Buddha's death and its first written form? How does this affect your view of the materials it contains?

The First and Second Great Awakenings

Lecture 12

As it occurs, a dream seems real enough. Only when we awaken do we recognize that what we thought to be real was actually a fabrication of the mind. This was precisely the way the Buddha interpreted the human situation. All of us, excepting only rare, fully liberated persons, live in a self-generated fantasy, unable to distinguish reality from reverie.

The two events of the Buddha's life almost certainly rooted in history are traditionally called the Great Renunciation, when Gotama began the life of a *samana*, and the Enlightenment, when he realized the way to escape *samsāra*; we will call them the **First and Second Great Awakenings**. The title "Buddha" literally means "one who has awakened," suggesting that the pivotal experience of liberation is a coming to awareness rather than the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, it implies that those who have not yet awakened are living in a dreamlike state, unable to distinguish reality from reverie.

The Buddha's renunciation of his privileged life is not often thought of as an awakening, but doing so frames it as a positive moment of insight and clarity, not as an impulse of revulsion or disgust. The term also connects the two experiences: Without the first awakening, there would have been no second. It is important to recognize that the Buddha's transformation was not an instant but a process, the result of years of preparation—or eons, if you accept the stories of his past lives.

The legends present the Buddha's first awakening (also called the Four Sights) in a highly dramatic form. Interestingly, the Pāli Canon presents it differently; the Buddha says his insight was the outcome of careful and deliberate reflection, which lacks the drama of the later legend but has the greater ring of truth. What happened to Gotama was an awakening to the fact that there are no exceptions to the rule of aging and death. Until we come face-to-face with this fact, we all live sheltered lives.

The history of religions suggests that spiritual journeys often begin as the result of some disappointment or traumatic experience. Unlike his final awakening, Gotama's first epiphany brought him not peace but restiveness. Perhaps most of us would have retreated within the walls of illusion, refused to accept our mortality, or perhaps we would choose to "eat, drink, and be merry" with the time left. The Buddha chose neither of these, instead staking everything on the faintest of hopes that there was a better way to live his life.

Gotama's first order of business as a *samana* was to find a teacher. He began his studies under Ālāra Kālāma, a famed yogi, who taught him how to reach the meditative consciousness called the "sphere beyond materiality." He then went to Uddaka Rāmaputta, who taught him how to reach the sphere of "neither perception nor nonperception." Neither of these, he realized, were the highest attainments of spirituality as his teachers had claimed. Joined by five *samanas* who had been students of Rāmaputta, Gotama added the extreme asceticism to his practice. They systematically tried to bring their flesh as close to death as possible through fasting and not bathing. Eventually,



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After years of struggle, Siddhattha sat down under a tree and "woke up" to the cause of suffering and to its final cessation.

Gotama realized this would lead to death but with no spiritual gains. Just as he renounced his life of pleasure, he now renounced his life of pain. His companions, thinking he had abandoned the path to enlightenment, left him.

At a loss, Gotama rested under a tree and recollected that, as a child, attending to his breath made him more acutely aware of his surroundings and dispelled feelings of boredom and unrest. The path to nibbana might lie in this form of contemplation, so he decided to try this technique again. The Pāli accounts of what happened next are sparse. Later legends describe an onslaught of temptation and torment from the demonlike Mara, designed to sway Gotama from his goal. But Gotama would not be swayed, and Mara gave up. His confidence bolstered, Gotama's mind was expanding as he gained deeper insights into the human condition. Just as the morning star appeared in the sky before dawn, he became aware of the fact that he had finally discovered the ultimate truth. Henceforth, he was known as the Buddha. ■

Important Terms

First Great Awakening: Siddhattha Gotama's rejection of his privileged life for a life of seeking nibbana; also called the Great Renunciation.

Second Great Awakening: Siddhattha Gotama's enlightenment, the moment he earned the title of Buddha.

Questions to Consider

1. You have likely experienced an epiphany once or more in your life. Looking back, did the moment really come out of the blue, or was it the result of a string of other experiences?
2. Some Buddhists see Mara as an independent, malevolent entity, and others see Mara as a personification of Gotama's self-doubt. Which view is more amenable to you, and why?

Knowing the World

Lecture 13

They should not accept anything simply because it was based on a claim of revelation; or because it was rooted in tradition or commonly repeated as fact; or because it came from scriptures; or because it conformed to logic and seemed rational; or because the teacher was competent and possessed a fine reputation. These grounds were not enough.

The Buddha urged his students not to accept any dhamma as true until they had attained direct knowledge of it for themselves. He said the usual grounds on which most people accept something as true were insufficient for living the spiritual life. Much of what we call knowledge comes from second- and third-hand sources such as teachers, parents, friends, the news media, and the things we read. Usually this indirect knowledge is fine and even necessary. But the Buddha discouraged faith in matters of ultimate importance. To qualify as true, a doctrine or claim must be known by immediate experience.

Not only was the truth to be seen; it was to be embodied and lived out as well. The Buddha did his best to ensure that his dhamma was understood as a practical regimen leading to direct knowledge and not as a system of beliefs. During his 45-year teaching career, the Buddha instructed through philosophy, object lessons, thought experiments, even silence—simply refusing to answer questions put to him. To all, he presented his very life as the quintessence of his dhamma. “One who sees me,” he said, “sees the dhamma.”

The Buddha intentionally refused to speak on many metaphysical matters, such as the question of a created versus an infinite universe. These matters are called the *Avyakata*, which is usually translated as the “things that are not revealed” but which more literally means the “things that create unnecessary speech.” There has been much debate about why he ignored such questions, but his own explanation was that the answers were irrelevant to ending suffering. Dwelling on such questions merely distracts us from the path.

The Buddha appears to have accepted the many gods of his culture as part of a vast cosmos populated with all kinds of beings, including humans, animals, ghosts, and hell-beings, all trapped in samsāra. They could help human beings in certain ways, but they could not help them attain the supreme state of sublime peace. That was something each being—human and divine—had to discover for him- or herself.

Did the Buddha have a place for “God”—the monotheist idea of a supreme being? No. But if the term “God” is used to refer not to an anthropomorphic being but an ultimate, transcendent reality, then we could say the Buddha embraced a functional analogue to this—namely, nibbana, the unconditioned absolute. The Buddha said very little about nibbana; he taught that understanding existence, the conditioned world, was the way to see the unconditioned, the nibbana.

The Buddha’s **three marks of existence** were impermanence, insubstantiality, and insatiability. Impermanence, or **anicca** in Pāli, is significantly different from the simple idea that “things change”; rather, birth, growth, decay, and death occur at every instant in a manner difficult to discern without the skills of meditation, which makes it possible to sharpen perceptive attention to such a degree that one could have a direct knowledge of the momentary arising and passing away of all reality. The resemblance between successive moments is the result of what the Buddha called “conditioning,” meaning that one event (or collection of events) greatly influences, but does not completely determine, the next. There is continuity but not constancy.

The Buddha discouraged faith in matters of ultimate importance.

The Buddha’s understanding of change was so far-reaching, so thoroughgoing, that ultimately it meant that there were no “things” in the world at all. He did not think the universe was a complete illusion but that no item in our experience endured long enough or independently enough for us to say it was an entity with its own existence in space and time. Our minds, conditioned as they are by our language, tend to regard as “things” matters that are better understood as events or occurrences. Most of the time, it is

perfectly acceptable that our minds do this. The danger arises when we forget that talking and thinking about “things” is a mere convenient contrivance.

To summarize his understanding of impermanence, let us say the Buddha did not think that things changed; he thought that change was the only thing there was. ■

Important Terms

anicca: The Pāli word for impermanence in the Buddhist sense—not simply the notion that things change but the idea that change is the only thing that truly exists.

Avyakata: The metaphysical matters that the Buddha refused to discuss; the word may be translated as “things that are not revealed” or “things that create unnecessary speech.”

three marks of existence: In Buddhism, the three basic qualities of the material world: impermanence, insubstantiality, and insatiability.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the Buddha’s view on faith compare with the views other religious traditions you are familiar with? How does faith play a role in your life, in spiritual or other matters?
2. Some have noted similarities between the Buddha’s concept of impermanence and concepts in modern physics, such as space-time unity and wave-particle duality. Does thinking of impermanence as a scientific, rather than metaphysical, concept help or hinder your understanding?

Can't Get No Satisfaction

Lecture 14

Each of these worldviews holds a perspective on the self that the Buddha found untenable. He could find no reason to excuse any aspect of personhood from the principle of impermanence. Even more, he thought the tendency to deny the pervasiveness of change by sneaking permanence in through the back door with the idea of selfhood was the chief cause of human misery.

By observing the Buddha's vision of impermanence, we have already begun to make our acquaintance with insubstantiality, or **anatta**, the second of the Buddha's three marks of existence. Anatta literally translates as "no self" or "no soul." Human beings, he said, are not exempt from impermanence, yet almost every religious worldview, including the Hindu faith in which the Buddha was raised, posits an immortal soul or some core self. Even some modern views in psychology maintain the existence of a true self underlying the masks of our personality. But the Buddha could find no reason to excuse any aspect of personhood from impermanence and thought clinging to permanence through the idea of selfhood was the chief cause of human misery.

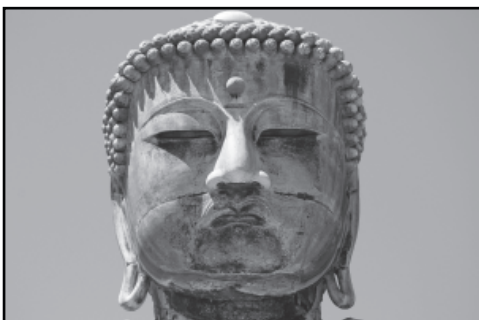
The Buddha was not trying to suggest that human beings do not exist; he merely refused to affirm the belief in an enduring, essential self or soul. It would be incorrect to say that the Buddha "believed in no-self"; rather, no-self means he declined to believe in the soul. He was convinced that the soul was an irredeemably flawed concept, an unwholesome and problematic way of thinking. To say the self "is" suggests that it is a thing—something fixed, unchanging, and separate from the rest of reality. Rather, a human is a compound of five processes called the **aggregates of being**: materiality, sensation, perception and apperception, conceptual constructs, and consciousness. These components are all rapidly changing processes, and none of them contains anything that could be identified as self, because we are not in complete control of any of these components.

For the Buddha, the problem with the concept of the self was not just that it was empirically unverifiable or unavailable to our experience, but that it gave rise to the third mark of existence, *dukkha*, or insatiability. You might find *dukkha* translated elsewhere as illness, anguish, sorrow, unease, distress, unsettledness, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, or disappointment. It is the opposite of *sukha*, meaning happiness or contentment. At the root of *dukkha* is the fact that you can never get enough of what you don't really need.

Happiness for the Buddha meant not fleeting pleasure but the supreme state of sublime peace, the deep, abiding contentment that was not dependent on circumstances. It is possible whether one's sensations are pleasant or unpleasant. All beings seek *sukha*, which

the Buddha did not see as a problem per se, but he saw grave problems with how we seek it. Because of our failure to understand impermanence and insubstantiality, we inevitably pursue happiness in the very ways that thwart its fulfillment, and our thirst for satisfaction intensifies and worsens.

Most people seek happiness through acquisition and/or aversion. Acquisition can refer to material wealth as well as experiences, rewards, or relationships. So what's the problem with this? The ephemeral nature of reality. Deep, abiding contentment cannot be gained by glomming onto transient things. Aversion can refer to avoiding unpleasant situations, things, or people. As with acquisition, the problem with trying to find your happiness through avoidance is this thing called reality, which does not allow us to evade unwanted experiences. The whole approach to contentment through acquisition or aversion is fundamentally misguided.



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Of all the aspects of the Buddha's teaching, no-self has been the feature most prone to misunderstanding. The Buddha was not suggesting that human beings do not exist; rather, the Buddha declined to believe in the soul.

Conditioned existence simply will not satisfy our deepest longings for happiness. When we awaken to the world “as it is,” we discover, paradoxically, that the only way to find happiness is to relinquish these feverish efforts to protect and empower this mistaken belief we call the self. ■

Important Terms

aggregates of being: The five processes the Buddha considered the only components of human existence: materiality, sensation, perception and apperception, conceptual constructs, and consciousness.

anatta: Insubstantiality, the second of the Buddha’s three marks of existence; literally, “no self” or “no soul.” It does not deny the existence of people but the notion of a core essence that is the self separate from the aggregates of being.

dukkha: Insatiability, the third of the Buddha’s three marks of existence. Sometimes translated as “unease,” “pain,” or “disappointment,” is the opposite of *sukha*, contentment, and is driven by desire.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you believe in the soul or some kind of essential self? Why or why not?
2. What do you understand as the difference between pleasure and contentment? Have you ever experienced the latter in the way the Buddha defines it?

Getting to the Farther Shore

Lecture 15

Language is grounded in human experience in the samsāric realm. Its vocabularies, metaphors, and grammars all refer to and derive from unenlightened experience in conditioned existence. How could it possibly suffice to explain that which is beyond this realm?

The Buddha said very little about nibbana and described it mostly in negative terms; language, which is grounded in samsāra, was insufficient for describing the unconditioned absolute. He therefore resorted to **apophasis**, or saying by way of negation. He called nibbana the cessation of *dukkha*, the eradication of ignorance, the termination of the illusion of selfhood, the cooling of selfish desires, the end of attachments, the conclusion of rebirth, the deathless. It was clearly not a place nor a reality attained at death but an awakening to the end of suffering in life.

A person who has awakened is known as an **arahant**, one who has “laid the burden down.” On death, the arahant enters parinibbana, the final nibbana. The distinction between nibbana and parinibbana is karma; when one awakens, *dukkha* ceases, but karma has not yet been spent. Nibbana entails the cessation of new karma, since all self-centered desires, the source of karma according to the Buddha, had been eliminated. But the ripening of old karmas has to take its due course. When all his or her karmic energies have been completely exhausted, the arahant attains parinibbana, free from the cycle of rebirth, never to be reborn again.

Specific countermeasures to *dukkha* are usually directed toward the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Compassion, or **karuna**, means to sympathize with a being’s suffering and to be strongly moved to alleviate it. Because human habits of self-centeredness are so deep and ingrained, Buddhist spiritual practice is a matter of gradual, gentle, disciplined reconditioning.

The Buddha taught that establishing sound moral conduct was foundational for spiritual advancement. Morality in the Buddha’s worldview was not

grounded in the commands of a god but in the quest to end suffering. Aspiration to moral behavior meant vowing to follow the **five precepts of wholesome action**, each of which sought to minimize harm and to dispel the illusion of the self by refusing to perform activities that perpetuate and reinforce it. The Buddha considered these ethical practices powerful enough to ensure a positive rebirth whether or not the practitioner followed any other aspects of the dhamma.

Nibbana entails the cessation of new karma, since all self-centered desires, the source of karma according to the Buddha, had been eliminated.

The Buddha encouraged various meditative practices toward different ends. Transformation of thought is the purpose of *metta*, or loving-kindness, meditation, which involves conjuring mental images of various persons in one's life and wishing for each of them freedom from illness, suffering, and fear and attainment of a sense of ease, contentment, and

well-being. The practitioner usually begins by wishing for his or her own happiness, then moves to a loved one, then a stranger, then an enemy, and concludes by evoking this same wish for all beings. The intent of this exercise is to channel thought patterns toward kindness. Sitting meditation is intended to sharpen the mind and increase awareness. The practice involves finding a quiet place, stilling the body, and bringing concentrated awareness to the breath as an anchor for one's attention. When one becomes aware of the mind straying, one gently redirects it back to attending to the breath. The goal of this exercise is not to prevent thoughts or sensations from arising but to become aware of the moment they do and to learn to let them go. The continual observance of this technique gradually disciplines the mind and the body, helps sharpen the consciousness, and trains the practitioner in the art of relinquishing thoughts.

Although oriented toward different factors that contribute to *dukkha*, these practices all work together to loosen the bonds that inhibit ultimate freedom and clarity of mind. The Buddha's approach to spirituality was to enlist an

arsenal of practices to remove incrementally the impediments that hinder us from being wise and compassionate. ■

Important Terms

apophasis: Saying by way of negation; this is how the Buddha usually described nibbana, which was beyond the power of language to describe.

arahant: In Buddhism, an awakened living being.

five precepts of wholesome action: In Buddhism, the foundational precepts of moral behavior—namely, refraining from harming sentient beings, from stealing and coveting, from sexual misconduct, from lies and false speech, and from using substances that impair the mind or body.

karuna: The Pāli word for compassion.

metta: Loving-kindness meditation, which involves wishing well on the self, a loved one, a stranger, an enemy, and all beings to train oneself in compassion.

Question to Consider

1. The metaphysics of Buddhism stand in stark contrast to most Western theologies. Do you find the same to be true of Buddhism's ethics and spiritual disciplines, or do you see more similarities there?

How the Buddha Taught

Lecture 16

Initially, [the Buddha] concluded that trying to teach his dhamma—his vision of reality and liberation—would be futile. ... But he had a change of heart when one of the great gods suggested that some beings in the world have “only a little dust on their eyes” and are languishing because they do not know the way to freedom.

Out of compassion for those still suffering in *samsāra*, the Buddha decided to teach his Noble Path to those who might be ready to benefit from it. For 45 years, he traveled throughout the Gangetic Plain of India teaching others how to find the bliss of the nibbanic life, beginning with the five *samanas* who had abandoned him when he forsook asceticism. His first lesson as a fully awakened being was brief and to the point, philosophical, and particularly suited for longtime seekers. It was not a discourse for beginners. Yet it had been so carefully crafted that it became the touchstone of the Buddha’s whole dhamma. The tradition calls this inaugural address “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.”

The Buddha explained that he had ascertained four essential facts about life he called the **Four Noble Truths**. The first truth is that *dukkha* is a fact of unenlightened existence. The second is that suffering comes from failure to apprehend impermanence and insubstantiality—in particular, attachment to the notion of self. The third truth is that beings can escape from *dukkha*. Finally, the fourth truth is that cultivating compassion and wisdom leads to freedom from *dukkha*.

According to the Pāli canon, at the very moment the Buddha completed this discourse, the news of the dhamma reached the realm of the highest gods. One of the five *samanas* was immediately enlightened; shortly afterwards, the other four became arahants. These first five recipients of the Buddha’s dhamma formed the core of the sangha.

The Buddha then began to teach others—*samanas* and householders, men and women, and persons of all castes. Not all became monks; many

continued to live as laypersons and helped support the monks and nuns. And not all who heard the teachings accepted them. The Buddha felt no urge to compel anyone to accept his teaching, but to those who were ready to receive his teaching, a personal encounter with the Buddha was transformative.

The Buddha's daily life was much like that of any of the other monks in the sangha. He wandered for nine months of the year, settling only during the rainy season. When possible, he preferred to sleep in the open. He arose early after a very brief sleep and practiced meditation. After daybreak, he would stroll the area and talk to those around him. Later in the morning, he would take his begging bowl to a home in the nearest village to receive food for his one daily meal. Sometimes he was offered nothing, and he moved on to another home. Sometimes he was invited in for an elegant meal, but he always ate moderately and washed his own bowl.



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The Wheel of Dhamma, a symbol of the Buddha's first sermon. After his enlightenment, the Buddha set out on a life of teaching others, "setting the wheel in motion."

After the daily meal, he would nap. Later, he would receive visitors

and give instruction. When the others went to sleep, he sat in meditative silence—sometimes, the legends say, the gods would appear and ask him questions about the dhamma—until it was time to sleep again.

This quiet existence was, of course, punctuated by many noteworthy events, too many to list them all. Many of them were encounters with humans who were suffering greatly, where the Buddha uttered a timely and compassionate word that immediately transformed the sufferer. In each instance, his lesson was tailored to the particular needs of his listeners and delivered at a timely moment. The Buddha claimed that he only taught about suffering and the end of suffering; but in many respects, he also taught much about how to

teach, revealing himself as an astute observer of the human condition and a skillful communicator of wisdom. ■

Important Term

Four Noble Truths: The core doctrine of the Buddha's dhamma—namely, that *dukkha* is a fact of unenlightened existence, suffering comes from attachment, beings can escape from *dukkha*, and cultivating compassion and wisdom leads to freedom from *dukkha*.

Question to Consider

1. Have you ever personally experienced or witnessed a transformation from the right message uttered at the right time?

The Buddha and Buddhism

Lecture 17

Throughout his teaching career, the Buddha told his listeners, “All things in existence are subject to decay; everything that is born necessarily dies.” ... Although he had attained the highest level of fulfillment of which any being was capable, the Buddha, too, was subject to this truth.

The last days of the Buddha’s life are described in one of the great texts of the Buddhist tradition, the *Mahaparinibbanasutta*. According to this sutta, in his 80th year the Buddha increasingly felt the effects of aging and was afflicted by serious illnesses. Existence had become painful and tiresome, so he “renounced the life principle”—that is, he chose to allow the natural processes of decline to take their course. His final illness was from a meal of “hog’s mincemeat”; his symptoms suggested dysentery or food poisoning.

Despite intense pain, the Buddha faced his illness in full awareness and complete equanimity. Lying down out in the open between two Sala trees with his monks and nuns gathered around him, he asked three times if they had any lingering questions about the dhamma. Three times there was silence. Satisfied, the Buddha uttered his final words: “All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive for liberation with diligence,” then peacefully passed through the four states of deep meditation known as the **jhanas** and from there entered parinibbana. Like the crucifixion of Jesus, the Buddha’s death was a lesson for his followers: For those who have awakened, death is nothing to fear. And if there is nothing to fear in death, then there is nothing to fear in life.

But what happens to a fully awakened being at the time of death? Does he or she still exist? The Buddha simply refused to answer this question because it is premised on dualistic thinking: the concept that something either exists or does not exist. The Buddha knew that any answer he might give would serve to reinforce this flawed pattern of thinking. As with seeing nibbana, the realization of parinibbana can only be described apophatically, with language

that indicates what it is not. As you recall, the Buddha explained nibbana as the cessation of suffering, the end of ignorance, and the deconstruction of the illusion of the self. To these events, the parinibbana adds the final depletion of all energies that have sustained existence.

The body of the Buddha lay in state for six days after his death. On the seventh day, after the body was honored with perfumes and garlands, it was wrapped in oil-soaked cloth and burned on a pyre of aromatic wood at a sacred shrine near the site of the Buddha's parinibbana. Following the

cremation, the ashes and other irreducible parts of the body were buried as relics in massive earthen mounds known as **stūpas**, which later became pilgrimage sites.

Today, over one-half of the world's population lives in an area where Buddhism was or is a principal cultural force.

For many years, Buddhism was merely one of many sects in ancient India. It was not until the missionary efforts of Emperor Aśoka the Great in the 3rd century B.C.E. that Buddhism attained the status of an

international religion. Buddhism became a dominant cultural and religious force in India until the 12th–14th centuries C.E., when it became all but extinct in the country of its birth.

Buddhism experienced a number of doctrinal disputes in its early history. Today, Theravada, which means “the way of the elders,” is the oldest surviving form, practiced mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Somewhere around the time of Jesus, the Mahayana, or “great vehicle,” movement began in the monasteries of northern India, based on a collection of texts purported to contain teachings of the Buddha that had only been revealed to a select few of his students. Two developments in particular distinguish Mahayana from Theravada. First, Theravada had always maintained that Gotama Buddha was a human being; Mahayana believes him a transcendent reality known as the *dharma-kāya*, or the body of truth, giving him a more divine, godlike status. Second, in Theravada, bodhisatta was simply the title given to individuals prior to awakening, including the Buddha. In the Mahayana, the bodhisatta choose to forego entry into final nibbana and stay in samsāra to enable others to achieve awakening. Thus the

Mahayana began to take on the qualities of a savior religion. The Mahayana came to China during the Han dynasty in the early centuries of the current era and spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, becoming the most popular variety of Buddhism over time and producing new schools such as Zen and Vajrayana. Through these traditional forms, Buddhism has traversed and influenced cultures throughout the entire continent of Asia. Meanwhile, an influx of Asian practitioners who have come to the West in the last few centuries and an increasing number of Westerners who have adopted Buddhism as their own are creating a new tradition. ■

Important Terms

jhana: A deep meditative state.

stūpa: An earthen mound containing a relic of the Buddha.

Question to Consider

1. What is the difference between a religious leader and a spiritual savior? What aspects of the Buddha's life and teachings show him as one or the other?

The Jewish and Roman Worlds of Jesus

Lecture 18

Almost from the beginning, the relationship between this god and his chosen people was tempestuous, to say the least. Poets and prophets likened it to a marriage—a marriage that was sometimes tender and loving, and sometimes on the verge of divorce.

Jesus of Nazareth lived at the intersection of two very different cultures: ancient Judaism and the Roman Empire, each of which decisively shaped his life and teachings. Ancient Judaism was more than our modern idea of a “religion”; it was a culture, touching every aspect of life. Judaism traces its roots to a nomad named Abram who responded to the call of the god Yahweh to leave his home in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and journey to Canaan—later known as Palestine—where the state of Israel is now located. Over time, the 12 Jewish tribes living in Canaan were forged into the kingdom of Israel. But the cultural and political tensions between the groups became too great, and the kingdom was eventually split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, from which the terms “Jew” and “Judaism” were derived. But the citizens of both kingdoms regarded themselves as the children of Abraham and as the chosen people of the god Yahweh. The people of both kingdoms likewise blamed their many misfortunes on their own lack of fidelity to their god.

Between the 8th and 1st centuries B.C.E., the people of Israel and Judah suffered under repeated invasions by the armies of the massive empires that surrounded them, including Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and finally Rome, which greatly changed their way of life. Religion in the Jewish homeland between the Babylonian Exile and the time of Jesus was not at all homogenous. The most prominent sects were the **Pharisees**, the **Sadducees**, and the **Essenes**. Pharisaism arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. as a movement among lay Jews who believed in the authority of what was called the Oral Torah (later preserved in writing as the Mishnah) and were resistant to the idea of the priesthood. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead, an idea that developed rather late in ancient Judaism. The Sadducees,

in essence, held the opposite positions—supporting the priesthood and the written Torah and opposing the doctrine of resurrection. Rabbinic Judaism of today—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—is directly descended from Pharisaism. The Essenes were also active in this period, living in small, quasi-monastic, apolitical communities and focusing their practices on maintaining ritual purity. Each of these sects was a part of the world of Jesus.

The Roman Empire was the latest in a centuries-long series of foreign conquerors of this tiny region.

In 63 B.C.E., the Romans captured Jerusalem, and the Jewish homeland became a client state of Rome, with profound ramifications. Roman domination

exacerbated the existing class divisions and tensions within Jewish society. The small, wealthy, privileged Jewish ruling class, on behalf of their Roman overlords, levied heavy taxes upon the tenant farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, and servants who made up 90 percent of the population. Peasant life was precarious, and life expectancy for a peasant was a mere 30 years. This tenuous existence became even more so under the reign of King Herod the Great, one of the client rulers appointed by Rome. Despite his Jewish heritage, he was not particularly sensitive to the plight of other Jews. He confiscated peasant lands, essentially forcing the population into serfdom. When Herod died in 4 B.C.E., revolts—some led by organized groups like the **Zealots** and **Sicarii**—erupted throughout the kingdom and legions of imperial soldiers were dispatched to silence the rebels. Two thousand insurgents were crucified in Jerusalem, but the resistance movement continued to grow.

After Herod's death, Palestine was ruled Roman governors, including the famous Pontius Pilate. The chief priest of Jerusalem and his associates, known as the elders, were appointed by Rome and asked to manage internal Jewish affairs and to maintain peace. Their position brought them great power and wealth, yet their status was extremely precarious. This was Palestine in the time of Jesus: a world full of tension, a world on edge. ■

Important Terms

Essenes: A Jewish sect active between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E. whose members lived in quasi-monastic communities and were heavily concerned with maintaining ritual purity.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. and is the ancestor of modern rabbinic Judaism. Its members believed in the significance of the Oral Torah (later written down as the Mishnah), the primacy of scriptural study over Temple sacrifice, and the doctrine of resurrection of the dead.

Sadducees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. that promoted traditional Temple-centered worship and the authority of the priestly class over the scholarly (rabbinic) class.

Sicarii: A violent anti-Roman Jewish sect of the 1st century C.E. believed to be named for the daggers (*sica*) they carried. Judas Iscariot may have been a member of this group.

Zealots: An aggressively anti-Roman Jewish political sect active between the 1st century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E.

Question to Consider

1. In what ways was the political world in the time of Jesus similar to that of Confucius? Of the Buddha? In what ways was it different?

The Son of Mary

Lecture 19

We face difficulties in getting to the historical Jesus, the real individual who lived and died in human history. Our primary sources offer various portraits of the man, and the ways we and others since his time have construed those literary portrayals are profoundly shaped by our preconceptions.

Few persons in history have been subject to such a wide range of interpretations as Jesus, for clear reasons. The only texts that relate historically relevant material about his life are the four Gospels in the Christian New Testament and the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas, each presenting different viewpoints on who he was and what he taught. But perhaps more importantly, for Christians, who have been the sources of most explications of his life and teachings, Jesus functions not only as a savior or as the incarnation of the god of the Jews but as the personification of ideal humanity. Because of this, those who interpreted his life were apt to impute their own values and beliefs to the man.

What can we say with reasonable certainty about the life of Jesus? Virtually all credible scholars believe he was a real person who grew up in the village of Nazareth in the Galilee. Sometime within the last three years of his life, he began to work publicly as an itinerant teacher, preacher, and healer, garnering a modest following, and was executed as an insurrectionist against the Roman Empire. Beyond this, scholars debate which words and events reported in the Gospels can be taken as authentic and which might be embellished or invented.

Most historians believe that the **synoptic Gospels**—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—contain more historically reliable material than the Gospel of John, which is mainly theology told as biography. Mark was likely the first Gospel, written down around 70 C.E., near the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke were written a decade or two later and clearly use Mark's narrative as a source, along with a lost text called *Q*, short for *Quelle*, the German word for "source." About 75 percent of the noncanonical

Gospel of Thomas is also found in the synoptics. But these books are by no means identical, nor do they always relate historically precise material.

Invented or historically doubtful material was intended not to deceive but to make important theological statements. For example, the narrative of Jesus's birth in Matthew connects him to the lineage of King David, places his birth in Bethlehem, and matches in detail the prophecies in the book of Isaiah, linking Jesus to Jewish expectations of the messiah (*chrīstos* in Greek). Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents likely

never occurred (it appears in no other sources, Christian or otherwise) but is consistent with Herod's historical character and triggers the Flight into Egypt, which recalls the story of Moses—a comparison that continues throughout Matthew's Gospel. Luke, on the other hand, traces Jesus's lineage all the way to Adam and places the story in a Roman, not a Jewish, political context, underscoring Jesus's universal importance. The importance of Mary in the story, the contrast to Augustus, and the presence of the shepherds in Luke's account associate Jesus with the commoners and the disenfranchised.

Do those differences really matter? We should at least acknowledge that the authors' choice of details is shaped by their theological presuppositions and intentions. It is more plausible to say that these are different stories,



Unlike in popular Nativity stories, which have the wise men arriving near the time of Jesus's birth, Matthew indicates that they arrived two years later.

addressed to different audiences, and told to convey different ideas about who Jesus was. Neither author is interested in objectively reporting events.

In Jesus's own lifetime, those who knew him had a great many ideas about who he was and what he meant when he taught and performed mighty deeds. A half-century later, when the Gospels were being written down, the diversity of viewpoints about his life and teachings remained. Since that time, the interpretations have only continued to amass. ■

Important Terms

christos: The Greek translation of the Hebrew term “messiah,” meaning “anointed one.”

Q: A lost source text used by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

synoptic Gospels: The collective name for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Question to Consider

1. If you are a member of a faith tradition (particularly one of those founded or inspired by one of our four sages), how important is the historical accuracy of scripture to your faith?

The First 30 Years

Lecture 20

What did Jesus look like? What was he like as a child? How did he treat his parents and other family members? Was he educated? Could he read and write? Did he live in Nazareth up until he began his public work? Was he married and, if so, why do the Gospels fail to mention his wife? ... We simply do not know enough based on the evidence we now have available.

There is very little that we can say about Jesus's first 30 years. Beyond the stories of his birth, we have only the biblical mentions of Jesus's circumcision and an incident at the Temple in Jerusalem when he was found astonishing the scholars with his wisdom. Our curiosity naturally urges us to wonder about many things that concerned some of the earliest Christians as well. In the absence of information, the human imagination, of course, steps in.

Tradition has been very happy to suggest answers to our natural questions. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (different from the previously mentioned Gospel of Thomas) briefly describes Jesus during his first 12 years, about which the Bible is completely silent. This collection of about a dozen tales was probably written in the latter half of the 2nd century C.E. and features tales of the preteen Jesus performing miracles, including raising a friend from the dead, some of them childishly impulsive or ethically questionable. In essence, they attribute to the boy the powers of the man but add the element of immaturity. Scholars think these stories contain little historical fact, subordinating history to theology.

One persistent idea has been that as a young man, Jesus traveled to India, where he studied under Hindu and Buddhist gurus, and then returned to Palestine to preach a Judaized version of these religions. Advocates of this view point to the remarkable parallels between Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism, which also developed in the first centuries C.E. A different version of this story suggests that Jesus escaped death on the cross and made his

way to Kashmir, where *he* taught the Buddhist and Hindu scholars. Modern scholars think both stories are highly unlikely.

In recent years, the question of whether or not Jesus was married has become a matter of public discourse and has stirred up a good deal of controversy. What is interesting is the way the suggestion of a married Jesus meets with such resistance and horror by many. Perhaps people find something so troubling about the whole sexual dimension of human experience that they regard it unworthy of the one they consider truly god and truly human. Once

again, we see how preconceptions about divinity and humanity can inform and perhaps even skew an interpretation of Jesus.

There are hints, however, that John's relationship to Jesus was more than simply that of a herald or harbinger.

Any real knowledge we have about the historical Jesus does not start until the debut of his public

activity near the age of 30, near the point at which Mark, the oldest Gospel, begins. The New Testament Gospels all regard John the Baptist as Jesus's forerunner and all identify John with a figure from the book of Isaiah who "shouts in the wilderness: Make ready the way of the Lord." He performed ritual cleansings—baptisms—in the Jordan River, in the wilderness of Judea, where he lived an ascetic life, which has led some to speculate that he was an Essene.

It was only after John's arrest and imprisonment that Jesus began his own work, and his message was the same as John's: Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near. We could therefore speculate that John was not just Jesus's precursor but also his mentor and teacher. After Jesus's death and resurrection, his earlier relationship with John became a bit of a problem: If Jesus were the messiah, his baptism and discipleship with John might seem an embarrassment. Perhaps later traditions recast John as Jesus's forerunner to keep him subordinate.

Scholars agree that the coming of God's kingdom was the substance of Jesus's message, but there has been much debate about the details. What exactly did Jesus mean by "the Kingdom of God"? Was this kingdom earthly

or heavenly? What did Jesus mean by “at hand”? What changes would the coming entail? How did he understand his own role? Jesus never addressed these issues directly. Instead, he tried to illustrate his meaning by parable and paradox and to demonstrate it by acts of healing, exorcism, and flouting religious customs. According to the Gospels, even his closest associates did not always grasp his meaning. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Is filling in the gaps in Jesus’s biography merely an academic exercise, or could this information have theological repercussions for Christians?
2. Does the idea of Jesus having a mentor affect your opinion of claims about his divinity?

The Kingdom of God

Lecture 21

For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was not a place where the streets were paved with gold and Saint Peter guarded the pearly gates. ... The important thing to bear in mind is that for Jesus, the Kingdom of God was not a location. ... The kingdom, for Jesus, was an invisible or intangible reality.

There is little disagreement among biblical scholars that the reign of God was the focus of Jesus's life's work. The debates arise when these scholars try to determine what exactly Jesus meant by this phrase. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, we find the Greek term *Basileia tou Theou*; Matthew, however, uses slightly different words: *Basileia tōn Ouranōn*, the "Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew probably used the word "heaven" as a euphemism since his Gospel was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience and the Jews customarily avoided using God's name. (You might also recall how in ancient China "heaven" and "god" were sometimes used interchangeably.) But neither "Kingdom of Heaven" nor "Kingdom of God" should be understood as a physical location at all.

The kingdom, for Jesus, was an invisible or intangible reality. Although it is not localized to a particular place, it is understood to be an earthly reality. It is not territorial, but it is terrestrial. Contrary to the popular mythology of later Christianity, Jesus never spoke of human beings going to heaven but said that the Kingdom of Heaven would come to earth. Everything Jesus said about it suggests that God's kingdom would be an earthly utopia, a blessed state of affairs free of suffering and poverty, in which justice and harmony flourish. Jesus's descriptions of and analogies for the reign of God seemed to suggest that it was the exact opposite of the reign of Caesar.

One of the best-known descriptions of the kingdom is the **Beatitudes**, which appears in different forms in Luke and Matthew. Reading or hearing this passage from the perspective of a politically oppressed, economically struggling community, the political overtones of the message become obvious; certainly they were not lost on his listeners. The juxtaposition

of these blessings and curses in Luke intimates the paradoxical character of God's dominion, contravening the common values of the world.

Paradox abounds throughout the teachings of Jesus, particularly in his parables. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan, the real point is not that people should be compassionate but the sense of surprise—and even shock—that it induced in Jesus's audience through the selfish behavior of the “good” characters and the compassionate behavior of the “bad” character. It is hard to forget such a story; the mind mulls it over and over. And it reminds the listener that the Kingdom of God will not be what you expect. Jesus's message was also conveyed through his actions, particularly his healings, exorcisms, and miracles (what the Gospels refer to as “signs” and “powerful acts”). The story of the wedding celebration at Cana, for example, contains many inversions and paradoxes: Jesus seems to refuse his mother's request for help but helps out anyway; the best wine is served last, when it ought to come first; even the atmosphere of joy and celebration is far removed from everyday life in that time and place.



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As an adult, Jesus preached in largely rural areas of Galilee.

Jesus's fame in his lifetime depended mainly on his reputation as a healer and exorcist. The healing stories have been variously interpreted throughout Christian history. Ordinarily, they were taken as indicative of Jesus's divine power. But stories of healings, exorcisms, powerful acts, and miracles are not unique to Jesus. Even stories of resurrections are not so unusual in the Bible and in literature worldwide. (That is not to say he was not divine, only that the miracle stories do not suffice to prove it.) What the miracles do suggest is that Jesus was foreshadowing life in the coming kingdom, where human suffering would be banished and the division of pure and impure would be obliterated, along with the categories of rich and poor, powerful and weak, sick and healthy. Jesus acted as if he were abolishing these distinctions by his very words and deeds. ■

Important Terms

Basileia tōn Ouranōn: A Greek phrase from the Gospel of Matthew usually translated as “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Basileia tou Theou: A Greek phrase from the Gospels of Mark and Luke usually translated as “Kingdom of God.”

Beatitudes: A passage found in similar forms in the Gospels of Matthew (5:3–12) and Luke (6:20–23) wherein Jesus describes how people will live in the Kingdom of Heaven, each line beginning with the phrase “Blessed are... .”

Questions to Consider

1. Jesus's concept of the Kingdom of Heaven can be interpreted as highly political, especially in the context of the early Roman Empire. To what political uses has his message been put, historically and to the present day? Do these uses seem to correspond to Jesus's intent as presented in the Bible and other ancient texts?
2. What parallels do you see between Jesus's teaching by paradox and techniques used by our other sages?

Back to the Future

Lecture 22

The ultimate reality for Jesus was, of course, the god of ancient Judaism, the same deity worshiped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is little, if anything, in Jesus's teaching to suggest that he departed in any way from the Jewish traditions in his thinking about God.

The first part of Jesus's message was to announce that the reign of God is near. The second part was an admonition to live our lives accordingly. In fact, Jesus wanted his followers to live as subjects of God's reign even before it arrived in its complete manifestation.

Jesus believed that the god of the Jews was the world's creator and king, that he was profoundly moral and interested in the welfare of his people, that he often intervened in the affairs of human beings, and that he formed relationships with persons. It is evident that Jesus understood his own relationship with God as an intimate one; calling God his father, or **Abba**, is one thing that scholars are virtually certain was an authentic practice of the historical Jesus. Although using the metaphor of a father for God is hardly unique in the history of the world's religions, it is relatively uncommon in ancient Judaism. Such a sense of God's nearness was likely based on profound experiences that Jesus identified as holy.

Some might argue that Jesus, as God incarnate, came into the world with a vivid god-consciousness. But the synoptic Gospels suggest quite the opposite. Whatever the case, Jesus invited his followers to regard the divine in the same intimate way that he did.

Jesus's convictions about human nature and the problems besetting humanity were not out of the ordinary for someone shaped by ancient Judaism, particularly by its prophetic tradition. Jesus seemed to think that people had gotten absorbed by trivialities and an inordinate concern for themselves, which led to the tremendous suffering he saw all around. The world's anguish was self-inflicted, because human beings had departed from God's way. For Jesus, life in God was more important than anything. If it meant giving up

everything else—including one's life—to participate in that reality, it would be worth it.

Reorienting one's life was not a one-time event. Jesus himself regularly practiced disciplines of spirituality, prayer in particular, which was not an opportunity to request God's assistance but a discipline for subordinating human desires to divine wisdom. Although Jesus prayed publicly, his preference was to do so in solitude, with an economy of words, and perhaps even silence—what some Christians today call **contemplative prayer**.

If the basic problem with human beings was their failure to care about the things God cared about, then the obvious solution was for them to reorient their lives to God.

Such departure from daily routine can bring a deeper awareness of one's own life and the world surrounding it.

Jesus also promoted the communal practice of taking meals. Like Confucius and the Buddha, Jesus regarded eating as an activity with profound spiritual significance.

The banquet was the symbol

par excellence of God's reign. Jesus refused to discriminate among his mealtime companions, deliberately flouting Jewish purity laws, which he saw as a human contrivance. Meals also symbolized and fostered the sense of community that was a hallmark of the kingdom. Sharing common food represented common dependence on the same earthly elements for sustenance.

Jesus's teachings and spiritual disciplines were oriented to sharpening persons' awareness of the divine reality and galvanizing the will to care about the things God cared about. And what God cared about, Jesus thought, was human fulfillment and happiness, abundant life for every human being, and justice. Life in the kingdom therefore meant acting in some extraordinary ways, ways that were unconventional and dangerous. Three principles stand out as especially important: nonviolence, antimaterialism, and forgiveness, which ironically seem to go against the grain of much of Western social and religious convention. ■

Important Terms

Abba: An Aramaic word translated as “father”; one of the few Aramaic words that the Greek New Testament preserves in its original form.

contemplative prayer: The Christian practice of prayer in solitude and silence, not unlike the Buddhist practice of meditation.

Questions to Consider

1. What sort of selfish trivialities occupied the people of Jesus’s world? Were these similar to the issues in the cultures of the other sages? In our culture today?
2. Eating (or a similar way to obtain energy) is a basic biological need of all life forms. Why do you think this everyday occurrence has taken on such religious and ethical importance in so many cultures?

Jesus's Christology

Lecture 23

We have observed that Jesus's teaching and actions centered on the coming of God's reign; our first approach to Jesus's christology, then, is to consider how he understood his role in this new order. Did he think of himself as simply a messenger warning others of the approaching new age or did he believe he was playing—or would play—a role in making it an actuality?

Christology is the branch of Christian thought that seeks to understand the nature and deeds of Jesus, which began shortly after his death and resurrection and continues to this day. We will attempt to answer what might seem to be an odd question: What was *Jesus's* christology? How did he understand his role in the new order of God's reign?

One of the most hotly debated areas of modern Jesus scholarship is when and how Jesus thought the kingdom would come. Since the last century, most critical scholars have thought that Jesus believed God's rule would be established within a few years of his lifetime, based on evidence from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke and Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. This idea helps explain certain beliefs and practices of the earliest Christians, such as the urgency of spreading Jesus's message and the practice of celibacy. This is called the **impending model**. Because the kingdom did not appear on time, the church had to revise its understanding of Jesus and his teachings. Another interpretation suggests that Jesus believed the kingdom was a present reality, already available to anyone willing to be a part of it. In this perspective, Jesus's mission was to teach others how to see and live in the kingdom because the full manifestation of God's reign on earth depends on the human willingness to accept it. This is called the **involvement model**.

The title by which Jesus has been most commonly known throughout history is the Christ, or the messiah, meaning “anointed one”—someone divinely appointed to a sacred task. Throughout Jewish scripture, numerous individuals are called messiahs, including King David and King Cyrus of

Persia. But by the time of Jesus, “messiah” had come to refer to a hero—not a divine being—who would restore the kingdom of Israel to its former greatness, and a slew of persons were claiming to be the Christ. Did Jesus make this claim for himself? In the Gospel of John, he makes this claim several times, but critical biblical scholars have doubts about the historicity of that book. In the synoptic Gospels, *others* assert that Jesus is the messiah, but Jesus seems hesitant to accept the title. Perhaps he was concerned that his followers might misunderstand what messiahship truly meant, or what Jesus considered true messiahship could not be revealed until his death and resurrection. Or perhaps he did not consider himself the messiah.



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More than a prophet figure, Jesus was a healer, exorcist, and wonder worker. In his presence, people sensed a sacred, restorative power.

The title of son of God is much better attested in the synoptic Gospels, but discerning Jesus’s understanding of this title is not easy. Throughout biblical literature, this phrase could refer to angels, humanity as a whole, or particular noble individuals. Notably, outside Jewish tradition, Augustus Caesar was called a son of god as well. There is little definitive evidence about whether Jesus thought of his sonship as a unique relationship to God.

One of the most frequently used expressions for Jesus in the synoptic Gospels is the son of man. Many Christians today believe this phrase indicates Jesus’s humanity versus his divinity. Historian Geza Vermes believes it was not really a title but just a polite way in which people referred to themselves.

But according to the book of Daniel, at the end of the world, a figure known as the Son of Man would descend from heaven to rule the earth. It is quite possible that this was Jesus's meaning. ■

Important Terms

Christology: The branch of Christian thought that seeks to understand the nature and deeds of Jesus.

impending model: The belief of early Christians (and possibly Jesus himself) that the coming of the Kingdom of God was imminent, within their own generation.

involvement model: The belief of later generations of Christians that the coming of the Kingdom of God was not a scheduled event but depended on human action to bring it about.

Question to Consider

1. Which of the titles used by or given to Jesus are complementary, and which are contradictory? Which of them seems to best harmonize with his stated message?

The Last Days in Jerusalem

Lecture 24

The apostle Paul ... based his entire theology on Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection without ever mentioning his teachings. ... Although other Christians have certainly given far more attention to Jesus's life and teachings than Paul did, on the whole they have still concurred with Paul's belief in the centrality of the death and resurrection.

Jesus's death and resurrection were without doubt the most important events of his life according to the New Testament. All four Gospels relate detailed stories of these occurrences. The apostle Paul based his entire theology on these events, and for two millennia, Christianity has followed his lead. But rather than view these events as a divinely planned transaction conferring the forgiveness of humanity's sins, let's consider them in relation to the central message of Jesus's life.

When Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem during the **Passover** festival, he may have intended to dramatize his message of the coming kingdom and to bring it to its final fullness. Jerusalem was the symbolic center of ancient Judaism and the home of the priests and elders who collaborated with Rome, and Passover was the time when the Jews celebrated their freedom from Egypt. As Pontius Pilate and his Roman troops paraded into the city at the start of the holiday to remind the Jews of Roman presence and power, Jesus entered the opposite end of the city alone, on a donkey, a humble king founding a peaceable kingdom.

During the days following his entry into the city, Jesus continued to speak of the Kingdom of God and perform acts to symbolize it. When Jesus declares that the Temple has become a "den of robbers," a phrase from the book of Jeremiah, he seems to be referencing not the money changers but the priests and Temple authorities who benefited from the Roman occupation. Jesus also instituted the ritual meal that would become the Christian sacrament of the **Eucharist**, the meaning of which would become the subject of fierce debate among Christians for centuries to come. It was during this meal that Judas Iscariot left to inform the Temple authorities of

Jesus's whereabouts, an act the Gospels all struggle to explain. But he was hardly the cause of Jesus's death. The stories suggest that Jesus was fully aware of what might happen to him by taking his message to Jerusalem during the Passover.

Because it was excruciating and public, crucifixion was reserved for those convicted of sedition against the state.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggles to accept what he believes is God's will but offers no resistance to the Temple police who come to arrest him. Jesus was taken

to Caiaphas, the high priest, and asked point-blank, "Are you the messiah?" Jesus gives an ambiguous answer but seems to accept the alternate title son of man. It was enough for the high priest to declare Jesus a blasphemer and for the council to judge him deserving of death. But executing such a sentence was the sole prerogative of Rome.

The priests brought Jesus before Pilate, where he again evaded the question of whether or not he was the messiah, a silence that could be seen as contempt for Roman authority. Pilate thus ordered Jesus's **crucifixion** on a charge of insurrection. Crucifixion was a slow, painful, humiliating death reserved for enemies of the state. According to Mark, Jesus's death was accompanied by celestial darkness and a Roman centurion's declaration that "Truly this man was God's Son!" The historicity of these events is doubtful, but they reinforce the importance of Jesus's death to his message.

The four Gospels all offer different accounts of what happened on the Sunday morning after Jesus's death. Mark, the earliest Gospel, ends abruptly with an open tomb and a message that the disciples would see Jesus again in Galilee. (The stories of Jesus's appearances that follow are later additions to the text.) Matthew ends his Gospel with Jesus appearing and commanding his disciples to spread his message. Luke tells the story of Jesus revealing himself during a meal with two of his followers and disappearing. Common Christianity has long taken these episodes to indicate Jesus's divinity, but was this really the Gospel writers' meaning, or is there another significance? ■

Important Terms

crucifixion: Execution on a cross; in the Roman Empire, this form of punishment was reserved for crimes of sedition and insurrection.

Eucharist: The Christian sacrament that commemorates the Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers in the Gospels (Matthew 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–38) shortly before his execution.

Passover: The Jewish festival commemorating the escape from Egyptian domination. At the time of Jesus, parallels between the Egyptian and Roman domination of the Jews raised Romans' fears of riot and revolt during the festival.

Question to Consider

1. Consider the stories of the release of Barabbas and the two criminals executed alongside Jesus. What are the theological implications of these incidents? What are the political implications? Do these two views complement or contrast with each other?

How Jesus Became Christ

Lecture 25

There is little agreement among the sources as to what occurred and to whom. But that *something* happened seems hard to deny. It is difficult to account for the fervent movement that began to coalesce among Jesus's followers without positing some powerful experience that convinced them that their teacher had been vindicated by God and lived on, in some fashion, despite his death.

The extraordinary and varied stories of Jesus's empty tomb and his appearances to his disciples that end each of the canonical Gospels invite us to inquire into their historical basis and their significance for those who accepted them as true. The simplest and most plausible explanation of this experience is that some of the disciples saw Jesus or perceived his presence after his death, but the exact nature of these perceptions cannot be determined. Nor can we assume they believed that the selfsame individual who died on Good Friday was *physically* brought back to life the following Sunday morning. The Gospels themselves indicate that the post-Easter Jesus was different from the Jesus they had known as their teacher and mentor.

Whether or not human beings collectively would be raised from the dead at the end of time was a matter of considerable debate during Jesus's time. Neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees seemed to think that "resurrection" was an individual, historical phenomenon. The fact that the early Christians used the term resurrection suggests they considered what happened to Jesus as an **eschatological**, end-of-days event. Paul called the resurrection of Jesus the "first fruits of those who have died," consistent with the early Christian belief that Jesus would return from heaven shortly. Paul's experience of the post-Easter Jesus—a spiritual encounter, not a physical one—appears to have shaped his theology, which as it spread transformed Jesus of Nazareth into Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and eventually God incarnate.

The substance of the message of the historical Jesus was the coming of God's kingdom and the necessity to live life in light of this new reality. Paul's message, as expressed in his letter to the Romans, was that "Christ died

for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” The messages are not necessarily incompatible, but they are not the same.

The final answers to the questions of Jesus’s identity and self-understanding are not now—and may never be—available to us, but we can build a “theory of Jesus.”

We know Jesus was a Galilean Jew born of peasant parents in Roman-occupied Palestine near the beginning of the 1st century C.E. He grew into adulthood with a keen sensitivity to the presence of the God of the Jews as well as matters of social justice and human suffering. Jesus found a teacher and role model in John the Baptist, although

Jesus’s skills and spiritual acumen probably transcended those of John, and he used those skills to help others see the truth for themselves. Jesus was also a healer, exorcist, and wonder worker. In the most historically reliable accounts, Jesus tends to resist the title Christ, or messiah, but almost certainly thought of himself as *a*—if not *the*—Son of God. Jesus also likely thought of himself as the Son of Man, viewing his own impending death not as a human sacrifice to effect the forgiveness of sins but as preparation to return to earth at the end of time. Jesus died a martyr’s death, bearing witness to the failings of the kingdom of man in contrast to the Kingdom of God. Did Jesus think he was God? Almost certainly not. The idea that Jesus was a



After his conversion to Christianity, Paul became the faith’s best-known missionary.

divine incarnation appeared many decades after his death, probably under the influence of Greek and Roman religious beliefs.

All of this might appear to undermine the central claims of the Christian tradition, but that is not necessarily so. Although there was a predominant expectation among Jews as to what this messiah would be, there was no official definition or job description. Christians had as much right to reinterpret the concept as anyone. Jesus may not have regarded himself as the messiah, yet in the way his followers came to judge his significance, the title was warranted. Jesus may not have thought of himself as God, but his followers may have discovered the divine through him to such a degree that it seemed fitting to call him God's incarnation. ■

Important Term

eschatological: Pertaining to the end of days or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Questions to Consider

1. Paul's preaching to the Roman world outside of Palestine brought early Christianity into direct contact with Greek and Roman religious culture. From what you may know of Greco-Roman myths and religious practices, how do you think they may have affected the early development of Christianity?
2. This lecture presents an argument that Jesus, just like Confucius and the Buddha, was a man, not a god. If this were true, how would it affect the practice of Christian groups you are familiar with? How much does it matter to the practice of the faith?

Arabia in the Days of Ignorance

Lecture 26

Although al-Lah was still recognized as the god supreme, he had now become one of many. Only a small remnant of monotheists, called the **hanifs**, remained faithful to Abraham's religion and worshiped al-Lah alone. Muslims refer to this age of polytheism and religious iconography as **al-Jāhiliyyah**—the days of ignorance.

Like Jews and Christians, Muslims trace their spiritual lineage to the great patriarch Abraham, or Ibrāhīm. According to Islam, Ibrāhīm was not a Jew but a devoted worshiper of the one true god, **al-Lah**. He and his son Ishmael, or Ismā'īl, established the **Ka'ba**—the House of God—in the city of Bacca, later called **Makkah**. But gradually, the Ka'ba became the home of the Arabian pantheon, housing the physical representations of over 300 local deities. Only the **hanifs** remained faithful to Ibrāhīm's religion and worshiped al-Lah alone. It was during this period—called **al-Jāhiliyyah**, or the days of ignorance—that the Prophet Muhammad was born.

Outside of Muslim sources, not a great deal is known about Arabia prior to the 7th century C.E. The sources are restricted to a handful of artifacts and written material from Egypt, Persia, Greece, and the Roman Empire. Pre-Islamic Arabia was an oral culture; the Qur'an was essentially the only written Arabic work of any significance. Recollections of the pre-Islamic period were put in writing after Islam's ascendancy and thus reflect a Muslim perspective.

Life in ancient Arabia was so hard that the great empires of the region had no ambition to conquer it. Its reputation as an uncivilized territory was shaped by its social structure and culture, comprising large, autonomous tribes and smaller subgroups of clans. There was no central authority or government. The scarcity of goods fostered sharp competition and outright hostility; the tribes were at constant war with one another. Ethical and religious culture centered on the supreme importance of the tribe, and a deeply ingrained custom of tribal vendetta prevented any possibility of unification.

The tribal ethic also included a number of virtues, particularly hospitality, generosity, and promise keeping. Tribal survival depended deeply on the virtue of *murūwah*, commonly translated as “manliness” but meaning to have courage, resilience, a willingness to avenge a wrong against the group, and a readiness to defend the weak and oppose the powerful.

Muslims remember al-Jāhiliyyah as an age of depravity, particularly racism and ethnic bigotry, usury, female infanticide, and sexual licentiousness. But these moral shortcomings, according to traditional Islamic interpretation, were merely symptomatic of a deeper problem—the worship of false gods.

Moral shortcomings, according to traditional Islamic interpretation, were merely symptomatic of a deeper problem—the worship of false gods.

The precise history of the Ka’ba prior to the advent of Islam is not known. In the 6th century C.E., it was the focal point of Arabian religion. Images of the gods were kept in the inner sanctum, and the exterior may have been covered in symbols of demons, angels, and jinn (or genies). It was a center for pilgrimage, and so Makkah was not only the religious center of Arabia but its commercial center as well. This custom of pilgrimage, known as the Hajj, was retained by Islam.

Like the religious culture of Confucius’s China, pre-Islamic Arabian religion was decidedly this-worldly. Like other ancient religions that are loosely described as pagan, it had no creed, scripture, or defined practices. It had no developed priesthood or hierarchy, although *kahins* functioned as priests at local shrines, performing sacrifices and offering prayers. They were able to fall into ecstatic trances and reveal divine communications through poems of rhyming couplets. They came from every social and economic stratum in Arabia, and included some women as well as men.

Any description of the religious landscape of ancient Arabia would be incomplete without mention of Judaism and Christianity. By the time of Muhammad, the Jews had been almost completely assimilated into the

culture of pre-Islamic Arabia. Their religious practices were loosely based on traditional Jewish beliefs and customs, but they also participated in aspects of the popular religion of the Arab pagans, such as the use of magic, charms, and divination. There were also some Arab tribes that practiced Christianity, such as the Nestorians (now known as the Assyrian Church of the East) and the Syrian Orthodox. Muhammad felt a great affinity for the Jews and Christians of ancient Arabia because he considered al-Lah the same god described in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. According to Qur'anic tradition, Muhammad was a hanif and never followed contemporary polytheistic practices. He preferred instead to retreat to the hills for periods of quiet contemplation and prayer, apart from the din and clamor of the world below. It was on one of these retreats that he received a message from al-Lah that would profoundly change his life and forever alter the course of human history. ■

Important Terms

al-Jāhiliyyah: Literally, “the days of ignorance”; the Muslim term for the period that began when the Arabs turned away from the religion of Abraham toward polytheism and ended with the founding of Islam.

al-Lah: Also spelled Allah; the name of the single god of Islam. According to Muslim tradition, this is the same being as the Judeo-Christian Yahweh/Jehovah.

hanif: A pre-Islamic Arabian monotheist; according to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad was raised in this faith.

Ka’ba: Literally, “the House of God”; the shrine at the center of the Great Mosque of Makkah, the holiest site in the Muslim faith. It dates to pre-Islamic times, when it was used to worship over 300 different gods or godlike beings, including Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary.

kahin: A poet-priest (or priestess) and oracle of pre-Islamic Arabian religion.

Makkah: Also spelled Mecca; the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the holiest city in Islam.

murūwah: Often translated as “manliness”; the Arabic cultural virtue encompassing courage, resilience, a willingness to avenge wrongdoing, and defense of the weak.

Question to Consider

1. Like many of the texts we have discussed so far, our sources for pre-Islamic Arabic religion were written long after the decline of its practices. How would you expect this to affect the accuracy of our information? What can we really know about this world?

The Trustworthy One

Lecture 27

The stories of Muhammad's birth and early life, like those of Confucius, the Buddha, and Jesus, portend his future greatness. ... They are told not to set forth historical information but to create a portrait of the individual who most embodies the spirit of Islam and whose very life offers to Muslims an unparalleled example of faith.

Most stories of Muhammad's life cannot be verified according to the standards of modern history, but there is sufficient material for constructing a reasonable account of him. Although he is mentioned by name only four times in the **Qur'an**, the scripture offers insight into Muhammad's life and the issues with which he struggled as the Islamic community, or *ummah*, evolved. Of immense importance to the faith, but of less value for historical purposes, are the **Hadith**, quotations and vignettes of his life from the oral tradition, written down over a century after his death.

Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, it is hard to pinpoint the day and month of Muhammad's birth on the modern Western calendar, but the year is traditionally reckoned to 570 C.E. As with our other sages, the biographies of Muhammad ascribe to him a noble lineage. He was born in Makkah into the Banu Hashim clan, which was part of Arabia's leading tribe, the Quraysh. Although once very powerful, by the time of Muhammad's birth, the clan had fallen on hard times and had begun to lose some of its earlier prestige. Again, as with the others, legends suggest supernatural aspects to Muhammad's conception, birth, and early childhood. He lost his father before his birth, his mother at the age of six, and his grandfather at the age of eight; he was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib, and his uncle's wife, Fatimah. Muhammad's childhood acquaintance with poverty, vulnerability, and loss would heighten his sensitivity to the weaker members of society, especially the parentless, the poor, and women. Like Jesus and the Buddha, Muhammad spent long periods alone in nature, often receiving there the revelations that would comprise the Qur'an.

We know virtually nothing about Muhammad's formal education—if any. Islamic tradition insists that Muhammad was unable to read or write but possessed a fine memory and excellent speaking skills. Some Western scholars, however, assert that Muhammad probably had a basic literacy needed in his adult work as a trader.

In adolescence, Muhammad was examined by a Christian hermit named Bahira, who interpreted a growth of skin between the boy's shoulder blades as "the seal of prophethood." Around the year 590 C.E., Muhammad attended an important tribal meeting convened by the forward-thinking tribal chief Abdallah ibn Ja'dan. There Muhammad witnessed the creation of the Alliance of the Virtuous, one of the world's first human rights statements. The virtues of fairness and honesty, perhaps instilled in that tribal meeting, were to guide Muhammad throughout his life. Those who knew him called him the "Trustworthy One."



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The Qur'an offers insight into Muhammad's life.

Early in adulthood, Muhammad worked as a shepherd. Later, he became a trader, where his reputation for honesty attracted the attention of a caravan owner and wealthy widow named Khadijah bint Khuwaylid. She hired him to lead her caravans and eventually sought to marry him. They lived together as husband and wife for about 25 years, until her death. Khadijah was Muhammad's confidante and was the first to embrace Islam when he began to receive revelations. According to the Sunni sources, they had six children—four daughters and two sons, both of whom died young. Shi'a sources contend that Khadijah and Muhammad had only one daughter, Fatimah, and that the other three were adopted. All traditions indicate that Muhammad greatly enjoyed family life and found much fulfillment as a husband and a father.

As Muhammad neared middle age, his stature as a devoted family man, an honest merchant, and as individual with sound judgment increased. By the time he was 35, many supposed that he would assume leadership of the Banu Hashim. Then, during a desert excursion for prayer and solitude, Muhammad had an experience that would forcefully thrust his life in a new direction. ■

Important Terms

Hadith: Quotations and vignettes of Muhammad's life written down about a century after his death. Different branches of Islam accept different groups of Hadith as authentic and give different levels of importance to them.

Qur'an: The central sacred text of Islam, accepted by all its traditions as the revealed word of al-Lah to Muhammad.

Question to Consider

1. We have noted that all four of our sages come from noble lineages, most of them fallen on hard times. Do you think this is coincidental or significant to their lives and works? Do you find it easy to believe, or somewhat suspect?

“I Am Only a Messenger”

Lecture 28

“Sometimes it comes to me like the reverberations of a bell, and those are the hardest on me; the reverberations stop when I am aware of their message. And sometimes the Angel takes the form of a man and speaks to me, and I am aware of what he says.”

—The Prophet Muhammad, *Sahih Bukhari*, I.3

Muhammad began receiving revelations in the month of Ramadān in the year 610 C.E. during one of his regular retreats to the wilderness for prayer and solitude. Awakened by an overwhelming presence, he heard the command, “Read!” When he responded that he could not read, he felt as if he were being violently squeezed to the point that he could barely breathe. The force subsided, and the process was repeated twice more. Then Muhammad was told: “Read, in the name of your Lord. ... He teaches man what he never knew” (Sura 96:1–5). Muhammad began to repeat the words he heard. Khadijah, who immediately believed his revelations were from God, went to see her cousin Waraqa bin Nawfal, an old and revered Christian, who said Muhammad was being called as a prophet to the Arabs. Muhammad struggled with this idea for a long time and told no one else about the experience.

After a few more revelations, the messages stopped for two years, causing Muhammad great despair. When they began again, al-Lah reassured him: “Soon your guardian Lord will give you what shall make you content” (Sura 93:5). He received more than 100 revelations over the next 20 years. Sometimes the voice was accompanied by a vision of the angel Gabriel, but very often, the revelation came as indistinct and overpowering sensations that required great effort to render into language.

Historically, many scholars from outside Islam have sought a naturalistic explanation for Muhammad’s revelations, such as epilepsy, a deep meditative state, or dreaming. None of these natural explanations necessarily means that Muhammad was disingenuous; it is difficult to believe he would have risked his life and his followers’ lives for something he knew to be a sham. Nor is it

incompatible with a divine origin of the revelations. There is no reason that al-Lah could not use epileptic seizures or the unconscious mind as media through which to communicate.

Others have sought to discredit the revelations by noting their similarity to the principles and precepts of other religions. Indeed, Muhammad never claimed novelty for his message; he insisted the message was ancient, as old as Adam. The novelty was the messenger. God had at last sent a prophet to the Arabs.

Muhammad never claimed novelty for his message.

To the contrary, he insisted the message was ancient, as old as Adam, humanity’s first prophet.

The novelty was the messenger.

Whenever Muhammad received a revelation, he committed the words to memory and recited them to others. Only after his death were they completely transcribed, perhaps as early as 20 or as late as 300 years later. The Qur’ān comprises 114 chapters, or **suras**, of over 6,000 verses, arranged from longest to shortest. In Islam, the Qur’ān serves

the role that Jesus does in Christianity—God’s word made manifest. More precisely, it is the words, not the book; the Qur’ān is most meaningful in spoken form. Some Muslims use a separate term—**Mushaf**—to designate the printed Qur’ān and **al-Qur’ān** for the recitation in Arabic.

Initially, the Islam movement was small, limited to Muhammad’s closest friends and family. Eventually, Muhammad came to understand that he had been called to be not simply a *nabi*—an ordinary prophet—but a *rasul*—a messenger, the bearer of al-Lah’s last revelation to humanity. The *shahadah*, the Muslim profession of faith, says: “I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger.”

As his understanding evolved, and despite the rejection of his message by tribal elders, whose power was threatened by these ideas, Muhammad never departed from the basic message of the earliest revelations: the oneness of al-Lah and the principle of human equality. Gradually, the revelations began to speak of a last day at which the dead would be resurrected and all souls

would be judged as individuals by al-Lah. Resurrection was a novel idea to the Arabs, and the idea that one's communal associations would mean nothing on that day was seen as absurd.

Despite the rejection and ridicule he endured from older and more powerful Makkans, Muhammad's movement grew. Some early followers misunderstood the stringency of Muhammad's monotheism. When Muhammad made it clear that Islam precluded the worship of the al-Lat or other goddesses, many renounced the faith. The most powerful members of the Quraysh asked Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib to withdraw his protection of the Prophet, but Abu Talib refused. The clan chiefs then tried to bribe Muhammad to stop preaching, but of course, he also refused. This recalls similar attempts in the lives of the Buddha and Jesus to lure them from their paths.

When those opposing the Prophet were unable to deter *him*, they began to persecute his followers. Finally, a husband and wife were tortured and killed for refusing to renounce their faith, and Islam had its first martyrs. ■

Important Terms

al-Qur'ān: The recitation of the Arabic Qur'an text, considered its most meaningful form by the Islamic faithful.

Mushaf: The printed Qur'an.

rasul: The Arabic word for "messenger"; in the context of Islam, an important prophet.

shahadah: The Muslim profession of faith: "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger."

sura: A verse of the Qur'an.

Questions to Consider

1. Muhammad is the first of our four sages to show doubt about his own mission, at least at the outset. What, if anything, do you think this says about Muhammad as a person?
2. Jesus and Muhammad, as far our sources indicate, suffered more political persecution than Confucius or the Buddha. Do you think this is because of their different cultures, some difference in their messages, or some other factor?

Madinah

Lecture 29

If Muhammad were to persuade the Makkans to worship al-Lah alone and reject the other gods, then surely the profit and prestige gained from the pilgrimage would suffer immensely. Yet commerce was not the only thing at risk. Muhammad's success could quite possibly bring down the wrath of the other deities.

The tribe and clan chiefs of Makkah had many reasons to want Muhammad silenced—financial, ethical, and metaphysical. As custodians of the Ka'ba, the Quraysh feared losing the profit and prestige the yearly pilgrimage brought to the city and their tribe. The message of equality and justice for all humans was threatening to the ancient Arabian way of life. And failing to worship all of the gods, they feared, might bring divine wrath upon the people. The Makkan leadership therefore turned to harassing, torturing, and even killing the members of Muhammad's new community of Muslims, the *ummah*.

Muhammad needed to find a way to provide some security for his fledgling community. He sent many followers to take refuge in a Christian kingdom in Abyssinia. After suffering through a boycott of his clan and the death of his wife and uncle, Muhammad experienced the **Night Journey**: Awakened by Gabriel and the Buraq, a Pegasus-like creature, who flew him to Jerusalem, the "Furthest Mosque," he met with Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other great prophets and prayed with them at the site where the Second Temple had stood. Afterwards, Gabriel escorted him to the heavens, where he was given a vision of paradise and hell and was told that Muslims should pray five times a day, rather than their customary three. Because of this event, Jerusalem is regarded as the third holiest city in Islam, and in 691, the Umayyad caliphs completed a shrine on the Second Temple site, known as the **Dome of the Rock**. Today, the Dome houses the massive boulder from which Muhammad was taken into heaven. The real significance of the story, however, has less to do with Jerusalem and more with the centrality of prayer.

The Prophet reported this experience to his fellow Makkans at the Ka'ba and lost many followers, who thought him mad. Around 621 C.E., however, he converted the two main tribes of the oasis city of Yathrib, which would later be known as Madinah. Muhammad began to encourage other Muslims to move there. When the Makkan leaders became aware that Muslims had been secretly migrating to Madinah, they organized an assassination squad composed of members from each clan. But before they could act, Gabriel told Muhammad to flee to Madinah, following an unconventional and dangerous route to confuse pursuers. This migration—the **Hijrah** as it is known in Islam—was a vitally important strategic and symbolic event in the life of the Prophet and the growing Muslim community. Muhammad would eventually return to Makkah for the pilgrimage, but he lived out his days in Madinah.

After his arrival, Muhammad negotiated alliances with the neighboring tribes, including several Jewish tribes. Muhammad's vision was to create a new community based on religious values rather than kinship, an unprecedented



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The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Within the dome is a boulder from which, Muslims believe, Muhammad was taken into heaven.

idea in ancient Arabia. Yet the Prophet never expected the Jews to accept Islam. In his view, they had already received a genuine revelation from Moses and the other prophets, and he considered the Qur'an to be part of the same fabric. He regarded Jews and Christians as "muslims" (with a small *m*), those who submit to the will of al-Lah.

**Muslims now date
the start of their
calendar to the year
of Muhammad's
resettlement, which
occurred in 1 A.H.,
anno hijrah, or 622
C.E.**

Despite the initial enthusiasm that greeted Muhammad's arrival in Madinah, not everyone remained happy about the presence of the Prophet. Abdallah ibn Ubbay had been preparing to become the king of Madinah and began to foment resistance to the Prophet. Some Jewish allies started to have grave misgivings about Muhammad as well. Muhammad had little interest in social and political leadership.

But after the Hijrah, the revelations began addressing practical social and political matters. Muhammad's attention was turning toward consolidating the Muslim community and ensuring its survival. In Makkah, Islam was essentially pacifistic. Now, al-Lah granted permission for the Muslims to engage in combat for a just cause, such as to obtain reparations for lost property and to hold the wicked in check.

Muhammad ordered a series of raids in 623 C.E.; although he later repudiated the act, it demonstrated to Islam's enemies that the *ummah* was not weak. The first real battle between the Quraysh and the Muslims occurred in 624 at Badr. Muhammad proved to be an impressive military leader, and the Quraysh were routed. Muhammad spared the lives of all the prisoners but two who had been especially cruel in the conflict, and he equitably distributed the spoils of battle, both uncommon practices at the time. Muhammad's battle practices followed the guidelines of what ethicists call just war theory. The principal objective in his military operations was to preserve and protect his community. He never fought out of pure aggression or anger. Furthermore, the revelations enjoined the Muslims to spare the lives of women, children, noncombatants, and even crops and animals. Muhammad treated his prisoners humanely and prohibited the Muslims from mutilating or desecrating the corpses of the dead. ■

Important Terms

Dome of the Rock: The mosque on Temple Mount, Jerusalem. It was built by the Umayyad caliphs to commemorate Muhammad's Night Journey.

Hijrah: The flight of Muhammad and the fledgling Muslim community from Makkah to Madinah in 621 C.E.

Night Journey: One of the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual experiences, in which he visited Jerusalem and spoke with al-Lah's previous prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. This experience is why Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islam. It is commemorated in the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount, Jerusalem.

ummah: The Muslim community of the faithful.

Questions to Consider

1. This lecture describes some of the earliest interactions between Muslims and Jews. From what you have learned, does the faiths' common history seem more a reason for conflict or cooperation?
2. Muhammad struggled with but eventually accepted the idea of a just war. Do you think our other sages would agree with his reasoning?

“There Is No God but al-Lah”

Lecture 30

“O you who believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and the scripture He sent to His Messenger, and the scripture He sent to those before. Any who deny Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Day of Judgment [has] gone far, far astray.” —Sura 4:136

Within a few years of Muhammad’s resettlement in Madinah, the salient features of Islam had been defined by revelation and experience. The Qur’an makes clear that God, angels, prophets, revealed books, and a forthcoming day of judgment are the central beliefs of the faith. Muhammad was not introducing a new deity to the Arabs, but he was making a particular assertion about the nature of the ultimate reality. For his time and place, it was a radical statement, and it nearly got him killed.

Muhammad’s provocative contention was that the fundamental character of ultimate reality is **tawhid**, or “unity.” The very first words of the *shahadah* proclaim: “There is no god but al-Lah” or “There is no god but God”; on the face of it, this seems a straightforward declaration of monotheism. But the claim is not just singleness but singularity: al-Lah is incomparable, utterly unlike anything else in human experience. al-Lah alone is eternal. al-Lah alone has no progenitor. al-Lah relies on no one or nothing else. al-Lah is the only one of his kind. al-Lah alone is indivisible. al-Lah infinitely exceeds human understanding. These statements about the nature of al-Lah help clarify why Islam can tolerate no other gods or goddesses. To suggest that al-Lah is a deity like Hubal or al-Uzza would imply that God can be imagined, envisioned, or understood like these others, and that would diminish the majesty and mystery of the ultimate reality.

To Muhammad, the doctrine of divine oneness was readily apparent: Reason itself dictates that there can be only one supreme being, otherwise the universe would be in complete chaos. The singularity and inscrutability of al-Lah, furthermore, entail certain claims about that ultimate reality that simply cannot be grasped or explained. Al-Lah exists without place, and he alone caused all things to exist. God needs the creation for nothing at all.

Everything that happens—good and evil—occurs because al-Lah wills it; yet al-Lah is never unjust. He never makes mistakes and is fully cognizant of the whole of reality.

Islamic theology distinguishes between the divine essence, which is beyond comprehension, and the divine attributes, which name certain qualities that assist in appropriately orienting the mind toward God. This distinction between a god's essence and his attributes is a common one in the history of world religions.

Muhammad was the “seal of the prophets,” the final and most important emissary of God, sent not just to a nation but to all humankind.

A well-known list of al-Lah's unique characteristics is known as the 99 Most Beautiful Names of God. Two of them appear at the start of every sura (except Sura 9) as the **bismillah**: “In the name of God, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful.” The other beautiful

names complement and supplement these attributes. The bismillah is recited as part of Muslim daily prayers, and it is often spoken as one undertakes a new task. Some Muslims think the bismillah contains the very essence of the Qur'an.

Misappropriating the divine attributes is part of what Islam considers to be the most heinous of sins: **shirk**—that is, connecting with al-Lah something that is less than ultimate or giving to something less than ultimate what belongs to al-Lah alone. *Shirk* is the only sin al-Lah cannot forgive, although only if one dies in this state of unbelief. *Shirk* is idolatry in its broadest sense—not just images of the divine, but whatever finite object becomes the locus of our highest values—money, country, self, religion.

Angels and prophets are the servants and messengers of al-Lah. Angels are beings created of light that can assume any form and travel great distances in an instant. Although sentient, they lack free will. They serve al-Lah in various ways. Angels are also the custodians of paradise and hell and the recorders of a person's good and bad deeds. Satan, or **Iblis**, is important in Islam, but he is not a fallen angel. Rather, he is a jinni who was created

from fire and was fervently devoted to worshiping al-Lah. Possessing free will, Iblīs's great misdeed, according to the Qur'an, was disobeying God's command for all creatures to prostrate themselves before Adam.

Angels and prophets both function as envoys of God, but prophets are human rather than celestial. Muhammad taught that al-Lah had sent prophets to every nation in the world at various points in history. There were slight variations in their proclamations because their words were directed to different audiences, but all taught the oneness of God and submission to divine will. About two dozen prophets are named in the Qur'an, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph, Job, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Although not named in the Qur'an, some modern Muslim communities regard Confucius and the Buddha as prophets as well. Muhammad was the "seal of the prophets," the final and most important emissary of God, sent not just to a nation but to all humankind.

Jesus is known in the Qur'an as **Īsa**, the son of Mārīam. He was not only a messenger; he was among the greatest of all human beings. His mission was to bear witness to the oneness of God and the necessity of submitting to the divine will. The Qur'an affirms his Virgin Birth and the miracles, yet—the Qur'an is emphatic about this—Jesus was not, and could not be, the son or incarnation of God.

The Qur'an frequently uses the phrase "People of the Book," which refers to pre-Islamic nations who received revelations from al-Lah in the form of a text—Jews, Christians, and sometimes the Sabians and Zoroastrians. The four pre-Qur'anic revealed books are the Scrolls of Abraham, the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel. For Islam, the Qur'an has an ontological status as the word of God. Some revelations allude to a written Qur'an existing in the divine presence even before it was sent down to the Prophet.

Like Jesus, Muhammad anticipated an end to the world as we know it. On the day of requital, the dead will rise, persons will be judged by their deeds, and they will be rewarded or punished accordingly. The time of this eschatological event is known only to al-Lah. But there will be certain signs preceding the Final Days, particularly natural disasters and the rapid erosion of human morality—harbingers of the end times found in eschatological

visions throughout the world. The sins that merit condemnation include lying and dishonesty, the denial of the tawhid and God's revelations, refusal to help the poor and hungry, usury, economic exploitation, and social oppression. Yet the mercy of al-Lah is so great that he directs his angels and prophets to rescue those who have done some good, and those who have done just a little good, and even those in whose hearts there is a single atom of goodness. ■

Important Terms

bismillah: The words that begin all but one of the Qur'an's suras: "In the name of God, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful."

Iblīs: The Arabic name for Satan; in Islam, a jinni who was cast out of heaven by al-Lah for refusing to bow to Adam.

Īsa: The Arabic name for Jesus, who is an important (but not divine) prophet in Islam.

shirk: Connecting with al-Lah something that is less than ultimate or giving to something less than ultimate what belongs to al-Lah alone. According to Islam, persisting in *shirk* is the only unpardonable sin.

tawhid: Often translated as "unity"; the Muslim doctrine that al-Lah is not simply one but is unique and incomparable.

Questions to Consider

1. In Islam, tawhid is the source of the prohibition of images of the Prophet and of al-Lah. Do you agree that religious art or iconography diminishes what it represents in some way? Why or why not?
2. In your own mind, can you reconcile the tension (in Islam or in any religion) between an all-merciful god and an unpardonable sin? If so, how?

The Ethics of Islam

Lecture 31

Adam and Eve chose wrongly and had to bear the consequences of their choice. But the Qur'anic story offers some slightly different details from the Bible. ... When al-Lah confronts the pair with their error, they confess, "Our Lord, we have wronged our own selves," then immediately they beg for forgiveness. In Genesis, on the other hand, Adam instantly blames Eve, Eve points the finger at the serpent, and no one says they're sorry.

From the start of the revelations, Gabriel made it clear that al-Lah had moral expectations of humanity. The ethical precepts of Islam are intrinsically related to its fundamental understanding of the nature and purpose of humanity. This understanding begins with the Qur'an's version of the story of Adam and Eve. The narrative echoes many details and themes of the biblical account but has several significant differences: Paradise was located in heaven, not on earth; when Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, they and their descendants were exiled until the last day. The eating of the fruit is regarded as a mistake made in a state of forgetfulness brought about by the ploys of Iblīs. This forgetfulness is, in Islam, the fundamental human fault.

For Muhammad, the descent of all humanity from the same ancestors entailed two important principles: First, all human beings are prone to the same heedlessness that led to the banishment from Paradise, and second, all human beings are fundamentally equal before God. The only difference of any significance is whether or not one surrenders to al-Lah and acts with justice and humility. This is not a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims; to surrender to the will of al-Lah did not mean that one had to use that specific name.

What did it mean to submit to the will of al-Lah? Throughout the Qur'an and Hadith, Muhammad enjoins all humans to worship only God, to be good to one's parents, and to refrain from murder and adultery. He makes several statements concerning economic justice and living frugally. Sura 17 makes

special mention of the necessity of caring for the poor, the orphaned, and the sojourner; a specific prohibition of killing children was also necessitated by Muhammad's historical context. The clear tenor of Sura 17 is the obligation to care for society's weakest and most vulnerable members.

One area of Islamic ethics that has received special attention in recent years is the role and status of women. The position of women in Islamic cultures throughout history has varied greatly, and the Qur'anic view of women and gender relations is the subject of divergent opinion among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. But scholars agree on a few fundamental issues. Muhammad regarded women and men as equal souls before al-Lah. Despite the highly patriarchal structure of pre-Islamic Arabia, Muhammad's teaching was only influenced—not determined—by traditional thinking about gender. Muhammad did believe, however, that men and women served different roles in society and had distinct rights and responsibilities. Whether these different social functions amount to social equality or inequality is a matter of debate.

Muhammad considered marriage a contract in which the woman's consent was essential. In pre-Islamic times, marriage was a virtual trade of property, usually transacted without the woman's permission. The Qur'an mandated that the bride was to receive and keep her dowry, and her personal property remained hers, not her husband's. Muhammad envisioned marriage as a relationship of mutual rights and responsibilities.

Although the Qur'an permits men to take up to four wives, it stipulates that he must be able to treat them all equally and fairly. Islamic **polygyny** has been the subject of much criticism throughout Western history, but the custom had a practical and humane purpose: Women significantly outnumbered men, and without male protection and support, their lives could be miserable. Muhammad recognized, however, that not all marriages were made in heaven, and so stipulated certain conditions under which divorce is possible. The couple must attempt reconciliation by all reasonable means; if reconciliation fails, both partners have the right to end the marriage.

Under Islam, females were given inheritance rights that had been restricted to males during the pre-Islamic period. The Qur'an requires that parents

bequeath their property to their daughters as well as their sons, albeit unequally. Men were required to support their parents, wives, children, and sisters, and to pay dowries, while women had no comparable responsibility.

For many in the contemporary Western world, the clothing of Muslim women, particularly the **hijāb**, or veil, symbolizes their religiously sanctioned subjugation by men. But that

It would be an anachronism to suggest that Muhammad was a 7th-century feminist. But it is not inaccurate to say that his teachings greatly improved the situation of women in his time.

interpretation is simplistic and, according to many Islamic scholars, misleading. Both women and men are enjoined to dress modestly; Muhammad considered modesty in dress to reflect modesty of the heart. The tradition of veiling, according to many Islamic scholars, is not mandated in the Qur'an. Wearing the veil was a pre-Islamic custom and was practiced by some Jewish and Christian women as well. Veiling was most likely adopted because of its association with the Prophet's wives.

Today, many Muslim women defend the veil because they find it a deterrent to unwanted sexual attention from men, and they have resisted efforts in some Western countries to force them to remove it in public.

It would be an anachronism to suggest that Muhammad was a 7th-century feminist. But it is not inaccurate to say that his teachings greatly improved the situation of women in his time.

No matter how one might judge the subsequent history of the religion of Islam, it is hard to see how the spirit of Muhammad's own teachings, as reflected in the Qur'an and Hadith, point to anything other than an ethical vision based on the fundamental spiritual equality and dignity of all human beings, without exception. ■

Important Terms

hijāb: The veil worn by many Muslim women as a gesture of modesty. Wearing the veil was a pre-Islamic tradition in the Middle East and is not mandated by the Qur'an.

polygyny: A marriage of one man to more than one woman; the Qur'an permits men to have up to four wives at one time, but only if he can treat each of them fairly.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of the varying claims made by Muslims and non-Muslims about the hijāb? Consider how your religious and/or cultural background influences your opinion. Does the “other side” have any good points?
2. Concern for society's vulnerable is a major theme in Muslim ethics and the ethics of many other faiths. How do you see this core belief played out in the world today by those of various faiths and those who do not subscribe to any faith tradition?

The Greater Jihad

Lecture 32

“In the name of God, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful. Praise is proper to God, Lord of the Universe, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful, Ruler of the Day of Requit. It is You we serve, to You we turn for help. Show us the straight path, the path of those You have favored, not of those who are objects of anger, nor of those who wander astray.”—Sura 1

After the Battle of Badr, Muhammad reportedly said, “We have returned from the lesser jihād to the greater jihād.” The word “**jihād**” is often translated as “holy war,” but in its basic sense, it simply means “struggle.” Muhammad was commenting on the greater difficulty and significance of the internal struggle of the soul versus the external battle with the sword. In the West, much more attention has been given to the lesser than to the greater jihād. In this lecture, we will try to redress that imbalance.

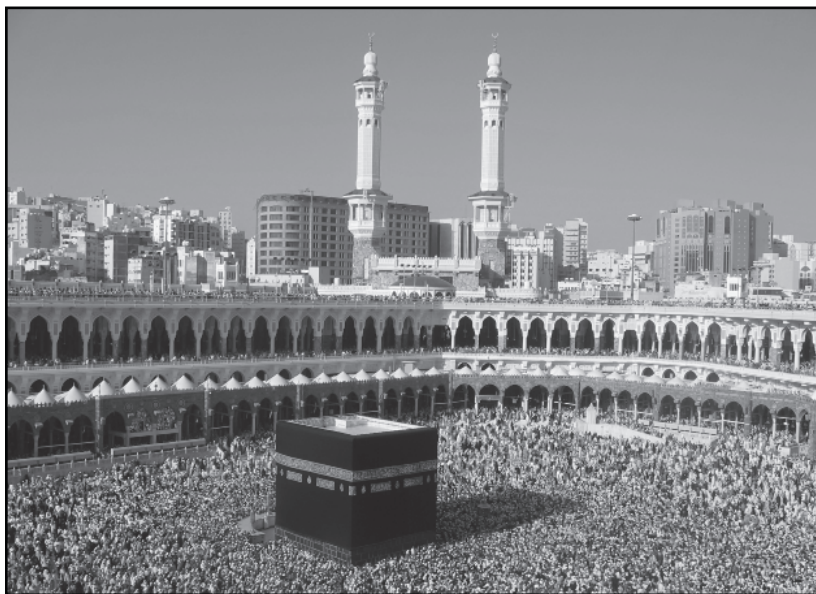
Long before the revelations began, prayer and contemplative retreats were regular observances for Muhammad. The Hadith say Gabriel taught the Prophet the proper forms of prayer, including a set of intricate movements and gestures. Today, the forms and prayers vary somewhat according to context and tradition, but all Muslim rituals contain similar elements, such as making ablutions (to create ritual purity); facing the Ka’ba, standing with open arms, kneeling, and prostration (to embody the act of submission); and specific recitations. Each *raka’ah*, or unit of prayer, for example, begins with an Arabic recitation of the first sura of the Qur’an. Words and gestures, mind and body thus coordinate to create a state of spiritual surrender.

Initially, Muhammad taught that ritual prayer should be practiced twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, the same pattern that Jesus and other Jews observed. Eventually, Gabriel revealed that twice a day was not sufficient. Muhammad learned on his Night Journey to heaven that al-Lah expected prayer five times a day as a regular reminder to the faithful to reorient their lives to him. One may pray alone or with others—although communal prayer

was preferred—at specified times of the day that depend on the position of the sun. Muhammad was known to pray in other ways and at other times, holding himself to a higher standard of discipline. He found praying in the quiet of the night especially meaningful because “truly the rising by night is a time when impression is more keen and speech more certain” (Sura 73).

Like daily ritual prayer, fasting during the month of **Ramadhān** is compulsory for all Muslims beyond the age of puberty. During this month, Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, sexual activity, and smoking from dawn to sundown. The fast can also be practiced voluntarily at almost any time, except on a few days when it is specifically forbidden. Muhammad fasted, according to tradition, each Monday and Thursday. (It is worth noting that Confucius, the Buddha, and Jesus also fasted at particular times in their lives.)

Fasting takes many forms and serves many purposes. Its principal purpose, I believe, regardless of tradition, is sharpening awareness. Refraining from certain items in our routine experience can make us more conscious of



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One of the Five Pillars of Islam, the Hajj is a pilgrimage to Makkah.

ourselves and our world. Fasting also serves to arouse a sense of compassion by enabling the practitioner to feel, even if only for a short while, the pangs of those who hunger and thirst, thereby cultivating greater awareness of

Today, nearly two million Muslims perform the Hajj each year.

those in need. While fasting is only required during Ramadan, Muhammad encouraged his community to practice it more frequently, a minimum of three times each month, but no more than

every other day. (Muhammad exempted those who were sick or enduring hardship from the Ramadan fast; he often tempered the letter of the law with the compassionate spirit he believed was characteristic of al-Lah.)

The *zakāh*, sometimes translated as “generosity,” is the practice of charity. Its purpose is twofold: to support the poor and dispossessed of the community and to purify the soul of materialism and greed. Because the *zakāh* is an obligation on every Muslim who is able to pay it, in Islamic countries it is usually levied as a tax.

Pilgrimage to Makkah, or the Hajj, was an ancient practice even in the time of the Prophet; some sources suggest it was little more than a pan-Arabian carnival. But the Ka’ba and the pilgrimage were deeply sacred to Muhammad. His final Hajj, a few months before his death, provided many elements of the ritual still practiced today. All Muslims are required to perform the Hajj at least once in a lifetime, if they can afford it. Today, nearly two million Muslims perform the Hajj each year.

What makes pilgrimage such a powerful and popular spiritual exercise, not just in Islam but in virtually all religions? The five basic stages of any pilgrimage are intention, separation, struggle, transformation, and return. A pilgrimage engages the body and the mind. It is an enactment, not merely the intellectual assent to beliefs and doctrines. It fully involves the senses in ways that other dimensions of religion do not and makes the abstractions of faith more real. To complete a pilgrimage is also to connect oneself to those who have walked the path before—a return to the origins of the faith and the self, but now the place is different because the pilgrim is different, transformed by the experience. ■

Important Terms

jihād: Literally, “struggle.” Often misunderstood in the West as “holy war,” it refers more properly to humankind’s internal struggle with its own spiritual weakness.

raka’ah: In Islam, a formal unit of prayer that begins with the first sura of the Qur’an.

Ramadān: The Muslim holy month of fasting; the ninth month of the Muslim calendar.

zakāh: The Muslim spiritual practice of charity, often levied as a tax in Islamic countries, similar to a tithe in medieval Christianity and some modern Protestant denominations.

Questions to Consider

1. If your personal spiritual discipline includes prayer, do you prefer to pray alone or communally? Do you prefer formal ritual or spontaneous practice?
2. Have you ever participated in a pilgrimage, whether one formally part of your faith tradition or of a more personal nature (i.e., to a location significant to your ancestors or to a site associated with a historical figure or event)? Was there a transformative aspect to your experience?

The Conquest of Makkah

Lecture 33

Within two years of the migration to Madinah, Muhammad and the Muslims finally faced the Quraysh in a major conflict at the well of Badr. Against the odds, and with the help of al-Lah, they believed, the Muslims defeated a Makkan army of over 1,000. ... A year later, they squared off against the Muslims at Uhud, just outside of Madinah. This time, due to greed and a lack of discipline, the Muslims were beaten ... [but] had not been utterly destroyed. ... The Makkans returned home victorious but not champions.

Muhammad's farewell pilgrimage a few months before his death in 632 C.E. capped a series of significant episodes that led to the triumph of Islam in Arabia. Within a few years of the migration to Madinah, Muhammad and the Muslims fought several battles against the Quraysh and other tribes, both Arabic and Jewish. Throughout this period, Muhammad was unable to avert a confederation of his enemies, but he was able to contain its size while increasing the strength of his own army. At the Siege of Madinah, the Muslims used trench warfare to outwit an enemy coalition that grossly outnumbered them, and the victorious forces did not show their customary mercy on their prisoners. The Persians and Byzantines took note of this shifting balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula and began to call Muhammad "king of the Arabs."

Muhammad had longed for years to perform the Hajj, but only in 628 C.E., year 6 of the Hijrah, did he feel the situation allowed him to perform the *'umrah*, the lesser pilgrimage. Before he set out, he offered the Makkans a truce but also indicated his preparedness to fight if they did not accept it. The Quraysh were fully aware of the military prowess of the Muslims by now and agreed to the terms of the 10-year Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. Effectively, the Quraysh were acknowledging Muhammad as an equal, and they were impressed by the Muslims' desire to incorporate the ancient pilgrimage into Islam.

In the years following the truce, Muhammad mounted sporadic military expeditions against assorted tribes. He also sent letters to the leaders of the Byzantine and Persian empires and Yemen, inviting them to embrace Islam. They declined. But overall, during this relatively quiet period, Muhammad enjoyed domestic life in Madinah.

The Treaty of Hdaybiyyah did not last for 10 years. In 630, a Quraysh ally attacked a Muslim ally. Muhammad asked the Quraysh to pay blood

Muslims have traditionally regarded Muhammad with tremendous affection and admiration.

money and break their association with the ally or consider the treaty invalid. Unwisely, they chose nullification. Muhammad was now committed to the conquest of the Quraysh. Just before 10,000 Muslims besieged Makkah, Abu Sufyan embraced Islam,

acknowledging that Makkah's patron deities were powerless before al-Lah. In response, Muhammad promised the Makkans that Abu Sufyan's home would be a safe haven. With just a few skirmishes and minimal bloodshed, Muhammad had conquered the city. Muhammad then made his way to the Ka'ba, opened its doors, removed the images of the gods, and destroyed them. Most of the Makkans adopted Islam, and Muhammad's stature throughout Arabia grew.

During the last year of his life (around 632 C.E./10 A.H.), Muhammad was visited twice, rather than the usual once, by Gabriel for the recitation of the Qur'an. Muhammad interpreted this as a sign that his death was imminent. Accordingly, he made plans to lead the Muslims on the greater pilgrimage to Makkah. During this farewell pilgrimage, Muhammad instructed the Muslims on the proper performance of the Hajj and delivered his final public discourse.

On the return trip to Madinah, Muhammad declared of Ali—his cousin, foster son, and son-in-law—"Whoever has me as his *mawla*, this Ali is also *his mawla*." Shortly after the Prophet's death, a dispute arose as to the meaning of this statement. Those who regarded it as Muhammad's endorsement of Ali as his successor came to be called the **Shi'a**, or "the followers"; those who

did not become known as the **Sunni**, or “those who follow the *Sunnah*” (the words and example of Muhammad).

Just a few months after the farewell pilgrimage, Muhammad became ill and suffered severe head pain for several days. He died in Madinah in Aīshah’s apartment on or around June 8, 632, at the age of 63. Many Muslims refused to believe that he had actually died. As soon as he received the news, Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s oldest and closest companions went to the mosque and announced: “O believers, if you worship Muhammad, then know that Muhammad is dead. But if you worship al-Lah, know that al-Lah never dies.” The Prophet’s tomb now serves as a mosque and a visitation site, especially for pilgrims making the Hajj. It is the second holiest place in Islam, next to the Ka’ba. As directed by revelation, Muhammad’s widows never remarried. They became known as the “mothers of the believers.” Aīshah survived the Prophet by several decades and helped to collect the Hadith. Hafsa assisted in putting together the first manuscript of the Qur’an.

Muslims have traditionally regarded Muhammad with tremendous affection and admiration. When Muslims say or write the name of Muhammad (or any other prophet in Islam), they usually follow it with the words “Peace be upon him.” The Prophet embodies the highest human qualities and serves as the model of true and complete humanity for Muslims. For many non-Muslims, the militarism of Muhammad’s last years will no doubt cast a dark shadow on their impression of him. Apologists have used different arguments—for example, Muhammad was following the example of the ancient Israelites. Each of the many arguments makes valid points, but whether these observations amount to justification for bloodshed is still another matter.

Within a few centuries, the religion and culture of Islam had moved beyond Arabia westward through North Africa and into Spain; it had traveled north through Palestine and into Asia Minor and the Balkans, and through Persia eastward into northern India. Eventually, it traveled to China, through Southeast Asia, and into Indonesia, which is today the nation with the largest Muslim population. It is currently the second largest religion next to Christianity and the world’s fastest-growing faith. ■

Important Terms

Shi'a: Muslims who consider Ali, Muhammad's cousin, his first official successor, rather than Abu Bakr. They constitute 15–20 percent of the present Muslim population.

Sunni: Muslims who consider Abu Bakr, not Muhammad's cousin Ali, Muhammad's first official successor. They constitute 80–85 percent of the present Muslim population.

'umrah: The "lesser pilgrimage"; a pilgrimage to Makkah that contains fewer ritual elements than the Hajj and may be performed at any time of the year.

Questions to Consider

1. Aside from being a spiritual and political/military leader, Muhammad was a devoted and involved family man. How do you think Islamic belief affects Muslim domestic life, and vice versa?
2. While wars have been fought in the names of all four of our sages, Muhammad was the only one among them to take up arms directly. How do you think this affects non-Muslims' perception of him versus the others? How does it affect your opinion of him?

Their Lives Compared

Lecture 34

Aside from the fabulous birth narratives and the occasional anecdotes about their early lives, we are able to say very little about these four individuals prior to adulthood. ... Whatever the nature of their prescribed education, it is clear that each of them had a thirst for understanding.

Without losing sight of their rootedness in particular times and places, we will now put those contextual matters in the background so we might give greater attention to the similarities and differences in the lives and teachings of our four sages to determine, as far as possible, what significance these four have for our lives today.

All four sages were born into old, well-established civilizations in the midst of momentous changes. The natures of those changes, however, were not the same. In view of their cultural settings, part of the greatness of each of these teachers must lie in his attunement to the profound issues driving the changes in his society and the clarity of his vision to imagine a way through them. Certainly, that keen awareness was rooted in a heightened sensitivity to the suffering of others.

Each of the four sages could claim a noble heritage but was unable or unwilling to take advantage of his ancestry. More importantly, each tried to redefine nobility as a matter of character, not birth.

The histories of the early lives of our sages are sketchy at best. Each is the subject of stories about how his early life foretold his future greatness or indicated something about his mature outlook on life. What does this really tell us? Probably not a great deal. It is likely that each of these stories was created and transmitted by pious followers who were using fictional devices to convey their beliefs. The stories tell us more about the impressions that Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad left on their followers than anything of great significance about their historical lives. In terms of marital and family arrangements, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad

seem to represent the gamut of human possibilities. As with their families of origin, it is difficult to draw compelling conclusions about the role that marriage and children may have played in their spiritual outlooks.

Little is known about these sages' formal education (or lack thereof), but each had a thirst for understanding and a fearless love for the truth that inspired them to endure hardships, such as persecution, exile, harsh asceticism, and even death. All four eventually committed themselves to a life of material simplicity, yet none of them believed there was anything intrinsically wrong with wealth and possessions—rather, they were distractions from the noble life.

All four were committed to spiritual discipline; all thought that becoming a certain kind of person by means of deliberate activities was essential, but each practiced different disciplines. But amid their diverse practices, one form of discipline is common to all four of these sages. Its commonality and centrality in their lives makes it tempting to suggest that perhaps this exercise was the secret of their success: All took time to be quiet, to focus on interior

experience, and to allow the mind to settle and become receptive to what the world had to teach them.

It [is] tempting to suggest that perhaps this exercise was the secret of their success: All took time to be quiet.

The lives of our four sages remind us of the necessity to stop and pay attention to our lives. Taking time to be quiet and attending to our lives need not result in some

intense, enlightening religious experience. Indeed, such intense moments are rare. But it must be a regular practice. It is simply a way to remind ourselves of what is *really* important, because we forget.

Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were four lives separated by culture and time, each nurtured in different ways, each brought up with different educations and in different religious traditions, yet connected by a desire to live life to its fullest extent, to understand it at its deepest levels, and to face its truths with courage. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Has formal education or mentoring played a role in your spiritual or philosophical life? What about the lives of your faith or tradition's leaders?
2. What spiritual or other disciplines, if any, have you found most valuable to your own development?

Their Teachings Compared

Lecture 35

Among those who first began to suggest that religions were pretty much the same were the critics of religion, those who thought humanity would be better off without it. Today, many religious folk themselves advocate this perspective, not to put an end to religion, of course, but to see the great divisions and rancor among religions, which have been the source of so much human anguish, diminished and perhaps eliminated.

Comparing religious teachers is not the same thing as comparing religions, which are far more complex realities than the philosophies of individuals. But it is much easier to compare specific teachings than to compare whole religions, and doing so might offer some insight into the problems facing our religiously plural world.

It is in the metaphysical arena that we see some of the greatest differences among Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Not only did they think of the ultimate reality in different ways; they thought differently about the importance of thinking about it. Confucius and the Buddha were reluctant to engage in matters they considered speculative. For Jesus and Muhammad, these topics were central to their perspectives; they were not matters of mere speculation because they had been disclosed in revelation. Yet it is important to note that there were some points at which the metaphysical teachings of all four converge: Each regarded reality as comprising different realms (at a minimum, heaven and earth) and diverse sorts of beings. They each posited an absolute or ultimate reality, and they all agreed that this absolute—whatever it is—is critical to human welfare. But here is how they contrast: To Confucius and the Buddha, the ultimate reality was beyond the gods; for Jesus and Muhammad, however, the one god *was* the ultimate reality.

This raises a question: If Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad agree that there is some absolute or unconditional reality, are they all talking about the same reality even though they conceptualize and speak of it differently? Some say yes: There is an absolute beyond words, as all four sages (and perhaps all major religions) attest; this ultimate reality is conceived and

expressed in different terms and images for cultural and linguistic reasons. Some say no: Father, al-Lah, the unconditioned, and heaven ultimately mean different things; *how* we think of the absolute is significant. Those who see real differences among these metaphysical views might go on to make other claims: Not all of these sages can be correct.

But one need not take that approach. It is possible to say that Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were teaching different visions of the ultimate reality leading to different ways of being genuinely human. That does not mean that *any* interpretation is appropriate or *every* style of life is equally suitable. For each of the sages, some ways of living are clearly superior to others.

All four sages indicate that satisfaction or happiness lies at the end of the path for those who practice the way of the noble life.

For the most part, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad worked within the frameworks of their cultures' basic understandings of human nature. Only the Buddha

offered a comprehensive teaching on the nature of body and self. All four sages believed in the spiritual equality of all persons. Their chief differences were in their understandings of the fundamental problems besetting human beings.

As Axial and post-Axial Age thinkers, all considered the present state of humanity as undesirable. In the Axial Age, religion came to be associated less with sustaining life than with effecting personal transformation. For Confucius, the solution to humanity's problems was education in moral virtue; for the Buddha, it was education in the true nature of reality and themselves. For both Jesus and Muhammad, it was education in the way established for them by God.

The final destinies of humankind envisioned by the four sages are as different as their estimations of the human predicament. Confucius promised no blissful afterlife. The Buddha promised the end to rebirth. Jesus promised eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Muhammad promised a return to

Paradise, from which Adam and Eve were exiled. Although imagined in different ways, all four sages indicate that satisfaction or happiness lies at the end of the path for those who practice the way of the noble life. There is an optimistic tenor to each of their teachings.

There is no doubt that all four teachers saw the ethical dimension of life as playing a key role in the meaning and purpose of existence and the ultimate human destiny, an influence of Axial Age thinking. Interestingly, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad seem to be closest to one another when we consider their ethical views. All four sages thought that self-centeredness is at the heart of human misery, although they had different solutions (the example of the ancient sages, the comprehension of no-self, and a life centered in God) to the problem. All agreed that the way out of our misery is by the path of kindness, compassion, and humility. ■

Questions to Consider

1. Have you noticed any similarities among our four sages not mentioned in this lecture? Are there other differences you find worthy of note?
2. Does your own spiritual or philosophical tradition (whether derived from one of these four sages or from elsewhere) give primacy to the problem of selfishness, or does it offer another cause as the root of human misery?
3. Besides those solutions offered by our four sages to the problem of selfishness, what other solutions have you heard suggested? Have any of them been of value to you?

Their Enduring Significance

Lecture 36

Our four teachers sought to redefine [nobility] in ways that made it accessible to anyone, regardless of heritage or social position. By their very lives, they exemplified ways for human beings to live noble lives and invited the rest of us to aspire to do the same. Their teachings and examples tell us that we are capable of much more than we think.

For me and many others, Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad attract our attention not only because they are fascinating historical figures but because their words and examples enrich our lives. Living during times when nobility was understood as a quality of birth, our four teachers redefined it as something accessible to anyone, and their lives were their proof. Yet they are equally clear in telling us the noble life is no easy path. Today, we are more likely to be taught to pursue excellence. Nobility involves excelling, but it also involves discerning which pursuits are worth the effort.

The requirements of the noble life are not difficult to understand, but they are hard to implement. The first requisite is commitment to truth and understanding. Personally, I know I often prefer my pleasant illusions to disturbing realities. What all of our four teachers tell us is that truth is nothing to fear; seeing the world and ourselves as we really are is liberating.

The corollary to a commitment to truth is humility—not self-abasement but honest self-knowledge. The wiser they became, the more the four sages became humble. It's a bit ironic, in a way, that those whom many have judged as humanity's most influential persons have led lives of such simplicity and modesty.

The commitment to truth and humility draws our attention to another virtue shared by these teachers: They were willing to learn, which takes both love for the truth and the awareness of one's limitations. And learning, in turn, requires attentiveness. We have already spoken of the way each teacher set aside time for regular periods of stillness and quietude. I even suggested

that this practice comes close to being the single most important factor in the development of their spiritual depths. I fear that our culture has almost completely lost sight of the importance of this discipline. We have become accustomed to seeking ever-new sources of stimulation, and we exercise little

The four sages recognized that the core problem of self-centeredness was manifested in many ways, not simply in the tendency of the individual to act selfishly.

control over the things we allow to shape our minds. Our world needs to rediscover the importance of being quiet and paying attention and to make a place for these practices in our daily lives.

The noble life as practiced by our sages also entails sensitivity to suffering, both our own and that of others. The great emphasis placed

on awareness of suffering by these teachers invites us to examine our lives as individuals and cultures to determine the ways we desensitize ourselves to this fundamental dimension of experience.

Finally, the four sages recognized that the core problem of self-centeredness was manifested in many ways, not simply in the tendency of the individual to act selfishly. Although explained and presented in different ways, for all four sages, the solution to the predicament of self-centeredness lies in transforming our conditioned ways of thinking and acting: Transformation begins in waking up to reality, to gaining clear apprehension.

While on certain aspects of the noble life the four sages appear to come close to one another, in other areas each has something unique to offer. Perhaps Confucius's most interesting belief is his faith in the near-magical power of virtue. Confucius thought that virtuous persons would effortlessly inspire others to act morally. We actually see that phenomenon displayed in the lives of our four teachers. The Buddha's teachings on non-attachment are clear and compelling arguments for the dangers of holding on too tightly to anything—not just material objects but ideas as well. This warning, coupled with his rigorous criteria for approaching claims of truth, seems particularly appropriate for our information-saturated world. Much of Christian belief focuses on the divinity of Jesus; without setting that aside, the view of Jesus

presented in these lectures invites us to focus on his humanity for a time, particularly his affirmation of life in the face of death and the courage he showed in practicing his own convictions. Muhammad, like the Buddha, reminds us of our own forgetfulness and demonstrates through his spiritual discipline how to remember to remember. He also invites us to accept the inscrutability of the ultimate reality.

It is customary in Buddhism to conclude such endeavors as this course with a dedication of merits to others. Accordingly, I offer whatever merits that may have been generated by my efforts to the well-being and happiness of my wife and daughter, whose own efforts and sacrifices have made my work possible and who have enriched my life beyond measure; to the good people of The Great Courses, whose hard work and dedication make all of this possible; and to those of you who have accompanied me on this journey. May each and every one of you—and indeed may *all* beings—be well and happy. ■

Question to Consider

1. How might you incorporate the wisdom of each of the sages in your own spiritual life and within the parameters of your own faith tradition or ethical philosophy?

Glossary

Abba: An Aramaic word translated as “father”; one of the few Aramaic words that the Greek New Testament preserves in its original form.

abhidhamma: The systematic presentation of the Buddha’s teachings; part of the Pāli Canon.

aggregates of being: The five processes the Buddha considered the only components of human existence: materiality, sensation, perception and apperception, conceptual constructs, and consciousness.

al-Jāhiliyyah: Literally, “the days of ignorance”; the Muslim term for the period that began when the Arabs turned away from the religion of Abraham toward polytheism and ended with the founding of Islam.

al-Lah: Also spelled Allah; the name of the single god of Islam. According to Muslim tradition, this is the same being as the Judeo-Christian Yahweh/Jehovah.

al-Qur’ān: The recitation of the Arabic Qur’an text, considered its most meaningful form by the Islamic faithful.

anatta: Insubstantiality, the second of the Buddha’s three marks of existence; literally, “no self” or “no soul.” It does not deny the existence of people but the notion of a core essence that is the self separate from the aggregates of being.

anicca: The Pāli word for impermanence in the Buddhist sense—not simply the notion that things change but the idea that change is the only thing that truly exists.

anthropology: The philosophical or theological study of the universal nature of humanity, as well as the meaning and purpose (if any) of human existence.

apophasis: Saying by way of negation; this is how the Buddha usually described nibbana, which was beyond the power of language to describe.

arahant: In Buddhism, an awakened living being.

ātman: The Hindu term for the self or soul.

Avyakata: The metaphysical matters that the Buddha refused to discuss; the word may be translated as “things that are not revealed” or “things that create unnecessary speech.”

Axial Age: The era of exceptional religious and philosophical creativity during the 1st millennium B.C.E. that gave rise to the world’s major religions.

bao: The impulse to respond to kindness with kindness.

Basileia tōn Ouranōn: A Greek phrase from the Gospel of Matthew usually translated as “Kingdom of Heaven.”

Basileia tou Theou: A Greek phrase from the Gospels of Mark and Luke usually translated as “Kingdom of God.”

Beatitudes: A passage found in similar forms in the Gospels of Matthew (5:3–12) and Luke (6:20–23) wherein Jesus describes how people will live in the Kingdom of Heaven, each line beginning with the phrase “Blessed are. ...”

bismillah: The words that begin all but one of the Qur’an’s suras: “In the name of God, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful.”

Brahman: The name of the ultimate reality in Hinduism.

Christology: The branch of Christian thought that seeks to understand the nature and deeds of Jesus.

christos: The Greek translation of the Hebrew term “messiah,” meaning “anointed one.”

contemplative prayer: The Christian practice of prayer in solitude and silence, not unlike the Buddhist practice of meditation.

crucifixion: Execution on a cross; in the Roman Empire, this form of punishment was reserved for crimes of sedition and insurrection.

dao: The Chinese term for “path” or “way,” as in a spiritual discipline.

Daoism: An ancient Chinese school of thought that stressed the naturalness of virtue and the value of living simply.

de: Virtue; also, moral charisma.

dharma: Literally, “truth”; in Hinduism, the duties incumbent on persons according to caste and gender.

di: In Chinese religion, earth; the material realm.

Dome of the Rock: The mosque on Temple Mount, Jerusalem. It was built by the Umayyad caliphs to commemorate Muhammad’s Night Journey.

dukkha: Insatiability, the third of the Buddha’s three marks of existence. Sometimes translated as “unease,” “pain,” or “disappointment,” it is the opposite of *sukha*, contentment, and is driven by desire.

eschatological: Pertaining to the end of days or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

Essenes: A Jewish sect active between the 2nd century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E. whose members lived in quasi-monastic communities and were heavily concerned with maintaining ritual purity.

ethics: The study of morality and proper human behavior.

Eucharist: The Christian sacrament that commemorates the Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers in the Gospels (Matthew 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–38) shortly before his execution.

filial piety: The practice of revering and honoring one's parents both during their lives and after their deaths. To Confucius, filiality was the root of all forms of love.

First Great Awakening: Siddhattha Gotama's rejection of his privileged life for a life of seeking nibbana; also called the Great Renunciation.

five precepts of wholesome action: In Buddhism, the foundational precepts of moral behavior—namely, refraining from harming sentient beings, from stealing and coveting, from sexual misconduct, from lies and false speech, and from using substances that impair the mind or body.

Four Noble Truths: The core doctrine of the Buddha's dhamma—namely, that *dukkha* is a fact of unenlightened existence, suffering comes from attachment, beings can escape from *dukkha*, and cultivating compassion and wisdom leads to freedom from *dukkha*.

Hadith: Quotations and vignettes of Muhammad's life written down about a century after his death. Different branches of Islam accept different groups of Hadith as authentic and give different levels of importance to them.

hanif: A pre-Islamic Arabian monotheist; according to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad was raised in this faith.

hijāb: The veil worn by many Muslim women as a gesture of modesty. Wearing the veil was a pre-Islamic tradition in the Middle East and is not mandated by the Qur'an.

Hijrah: The flight of Muhammad and the fledgling Muslim community from Makkah to Madinah in 621 C.E.

Huáxià: Literally, “grand florescence” or “illustrious blossoming”; one of ancient Chinese culture’s names for itself, implying a sense of cultural superiority.

Iblīs: The Arabic name for Satan; in Islam, a jinni who was cast out of heaven by al-Lah for refusing to bow to Adam.

impending model: The belief of early Christians (and possibly Jesus himself) that the coming of the Kingdom of God was imminent, within their own generation.

involvement model: The belief of later generations of Christians that the coming of the Kingdom of God was not a scheduled event but depended on human action to bring it about.

Īsa: The Arabic name for Jesus, who is an important (but not divine) prophet in Islam.

Jambudvīpa: An ancient name for India.

jhana: A deep meditative state.

jihād: Literally, “struggle.” Often misunderstood in the West as “holy war,” it refers more properly to humankind’s internal struggle with its own spiritual weakness.

jūnzi: The gentleman; in Confucian thought, this character type is the ideal for a life of political service.

Ka’ba: Literally, “the House of God”; the shrine at the center of the Great Mosque of Makkah, the holiest site in the Muslim faith. It dates to pre-Islamic times, when it was used to worship over 300 different gods or godlike beings, including Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary.

kahin: A poet-priest (or priestess) and oracle of pre-Islamic Arabian religion.

karma: In Hinduism, action and its consequences, specifically their ethical dimension.

karuna: The Pāli word for compassion.

keen discernment: The Confucian term for forestalling reflexive actions to obtain a clearer understanding of one's limitations and abilities.

Kongqiū: Confucius's given name. "Kong" translates loosely to "gratitude for an answered prayer" and "qiū" translates to "hill."

K'ung-fu-tzu: Literally, "Mister K'ung"; the honorific that was Latinized into "Confucius."

Legalism: An ancient Chinese school of thought that favored absolutism and the welfare of the state above the welfare of the people.

li: The practice of ritual; according to Confucius, this also encompasses etiquette.

Lunyu: The Chinese name of Confucius's *Analects*.

Makkah: Also spelled Mecca; the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the holiest city in Islam.

metaphysics: The study of the fundamental character and qualities of reality, including the origin of the universe and the nature of the divine.

metta: Loving-kindness meditation, which involves wishing well on the self, a loved one, a stranger, an enemy, and all beings to train oneself in compassion.

moksha: In Hinduism, release from samsāra, equivalent to nibbana in Buddhism.

murūwah: Often translated as “manliness”; the Arabic cultural virtue encompassing courage, resilience, a willingness to avenge wrongdoing, and defense of the weak.

Mushaf: The printed Qur’an.

Night Journey: One of the Prophet Muhammad’s spiritual experiences, in which he visited Jerusalem and spoke with al-Lah’s previous prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. This experience is why Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islam. It is commemorated in the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount, Jerusalem.

Passover: The Jewish festival commemorating the escape from Egyptian domination. At the time of Jesus, parallels between the Egyptian and Roman domination of the Jews raised Romans’ fears of riot and revolt during the festival.

Period of Warring States: The last phase of the Zhōu dynasty, during which great social and political unrest led to a flourishing of Chinese philosophy and religion.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. and is the ancestor of modern rabbinic Judaism. Its members believed in the significance of the Oral Torah (later written down as the Mishnah), the primacy of scriptural study over Temple sacrifice, and the doctrine of resurrection of the dead.

polygyny: A marriage of one man to more than one woman; the Qur’an permits men to have up to four wives at one time, but only if he can treat each of them fairly.

Q: A lost source text used by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

quiet sitting: The Confucian term for introspection or meditative practice.

Qur’an: The central sacred text of Islam, accepted by all its traditions as the revealed word of al-Lah to Muhammad.

raka'ah: In Islam, a formal unit of prayer that begins with the first sura of the Qur'an.

Ramadān: The Muslim holy month of fasting; the ninth month of the Muslim calendar.

rasul: The Arabic word for “messenger”; in the context of Islam, an important prophet.

ren: Humaneness; in Confucianism, the chief virtue of the morally perfect individual.

Sadducees: A Jewish sect that arose in the 2nd century B.C.E. that promoted traditional Temple-centered worship and the authority of the priestly class over the scholarly (rabbinic) class.

samana: An ancient Hindu ascetic.

samsāra: Literally “meandering”; the Hindu term for the transmigration of the soul, suggesting an aimless, meaningless process.

sangha: The Buddhist community of monks and nuns.

Second Great Awakening: Siddhattha Gotama's enlightenment, the moment he earned the title of Buddha.

shahadah: The Muslim profession of faith: “I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger.”

Shang Di: The supreme god of the ancient Chinese.

shen: The minor deities of ancient Chinese religion.

Shi'a: Muslims who consider Ali, Muhammad's cousin, his first official successor, rather than Abu Bakr. They constitute 15–20 percent of the present Muslim population.

shirk: Connecting with al-Lah something that is less than ultimate or giving to something less than ultimate what belongs to al-Lah alone. According to Islam, persisting in *shirk* is the only unpardonable sin.

Sicarii: A violent anti-Roman Jewish sect of the 1st century C.E. believed to be named for the daggers (*sica*) they carried. Judas Iscariot may have been a member of this group.

spiritual discipline: A set of practices designed as a part of the means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate reality.

stūpa: An earthen mound containing a relic of the Buddha.

Sunni: Muslims who consider Abu Bakr, not Muhammad's cousin Ali, Muhammad's first official successor. They constitute 80–85 percent of the present Muslim population.

sura: A verse of the Qur'an.

sutta: A discourse of the Buddha; part of the Pāli Canon.

synoptic Gospels: The collective name for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

tawhid: Often translated as “unity”; the Muslim doctrine that al-Lah is not simply one but is unique and incomparable.

three marks of existence: In Buddhism, the three basic qualities of the material world: impermanence, insubstantiality, and insatiability.

tiān: In Chinese religion, heaven; the spiritual realm. It was sometimes conceived of as a force and sometimes as a being.

tiānming: Literally, “the mandate of heaven”; the Chinese belief that the right to rule is conferred by the gods on virtuous leaders and removed by the gods from the corrupt, which implies the right of the people to rebel against and depose a leader who is not morally upright.

ummah: The Muslim community of the faithful.

‘umrah: The “lesser pilgrimage”; a pilgrimage to Makkah that contains fewer ritual elements than the Hajj and may be performed at any time of the year.

vinaya: The Buddhist monastic rule; part of the Pāli Canon.

waywardness: An inclination to act in self-serving and self-pleasing ways born of one’s innate drive of self-preservation.

zakāh: The Muslim spiritual practice of charity, often levied as a tax in Islamic countries, similar to a tithe in medieval Christianity and some modern Protestant denominations.

Zealots: An aggressively anti-Roman Jewish political sect active between the 1st century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E.

Zhōngguó: Literally, “central kingdom”; a name for the ancient Chinese kingdom that grew up in the Yellow River Valley under the Zhōu dynasty.

Zhuangzi: The great satirical classic of the Daoist tradition that mocked Confucius but also featured him as a character espousing Daoist views.

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I list these three volumes because they are based on a thematic structure similar to the one I have adopted for this course. *Ultimate Realities* juxtaposes Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives on the nature of the metaphysical absolute. *The Human Condition* does the same for each tradition's anthropological viewpoints, and *Religious Truth* explores the nature of their epistemologies. These volumes do not, however, highlight the teachings of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad but rather try to treat the whole historical traditions based on those teachings.

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O'Flaherty, Wendy D., ed. *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980. This work is a collection of essays by leading Indologists on the development of the concepts of transmigration and karma in the classical period.

Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Charles A. Moore, eds. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967. A fine selection of important Hindu texts, this work includes primary sources from the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy as well as texts from the heterodox traditions.

Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1959. Walpola Rahula was a Sri Lankan monk from the Theravada tradition, the oldest extant Buddhist tradition. His book, first published in 1959, remains one of the best introductions to the Four Noble Truths in English. Highly recommended.

Sharma, Arvind. *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Sharma's book is one of the clearest expositions of the fundamental concepts in classical Hinduism available. Each chapter is devoted to a particular idea, such as karma or moksha, which allows the reader to find the subject of his or her interest rapidly. The introduction provides a very helpful overview of Hindu thought, showing the relationship of Niguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman theologies.

Upaniśads. Translated by Patrick Olivelle. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Olivelle's translation is a superb rendering for the modern reader. It is informed by careful scholarship and provides excellent introductory material. This is the best of recent translations.

The Upanishads. Translated by Juan Mascaró. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965. Although not as accurate or as elegant as later translations, Mascaró's rendering is very accessible and readily available in the Penguin Classics edition. Represents a good selection of the most significant Upanishads.

Vipassana Fellowship. <http://www.vipassana.com>. A very nice website focused on the Buddhist meditation practice called vipassana, or insight. The site contains instructions on how to meditate as well as links to many other useful resources in Theravada Buddhism.

Wheeler, Mortimer. *Civilizations of the Indus Valley and Beyond*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972. Wheeler's writings on the Indus Valley provide a wealth of information. This work focuses on the archaeology of the Indus Valley and northern Indian culture up to the Mauryan Empire.

Jesus

Barton, Bruce. *The Man Nobody Knows*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925. Bruce Barton's interpretation of Jesus was one of the top-selling books in the United States in the 20th century. In his work, Barton portrays Jesus as the consummate salesman and CEO, the veritable "founder of modern business." I mention this work because of its popularity and as an example of the way interpretations of Jesus can easily reflect the interpreter's own preconceptions and unconscious assumptions.

Borg, Marcus. *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Marcus Borg is one of the members of the Jesus Seminar and a popular leader of current efforts to gain access to an historical Jesus. This book represents the culmination of his decades of scholarship. It is clearly written and argued, very accessible to the intelligent nonspecialist.

———. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. New York: HarperOne, 1995. One of Borg's shorter works that adumbrates his position that Jesus was a 1st century Jewish "spirit person," or what he calls a "mystic" in later books. *Meeting Jesus*, written specifically for a nonacademic audience, does not attempt to delve into the subtleties of Jesus research but tries to interpret his significance for modern Christians who find traditional claims about Jesus hard to accept.

Borg, Marcus, and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Written in response to the popularity of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, Borg and Crossan attempt to recount with historical accuracy the events leading up to Jesus's crucifixion.

Borg, Marcus, and N.T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Scholars Borg and Wright take very different positions on the historical Jesus and his significance. For lack of better terminology, they represent, respectively, the liberal and conservative wings of modern Jesus scholarship. This useful book brings together their divergent viewpoints, which enables readers to gain a better understanding of the range of opinions in contemporary research on Jesus.

Bornkamm, Günther. *Jesus of Nazareth*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995. This book is a classic in the field, but it is now dated. First published in 1956, Bornkamm's work is particularly useful for its analysis of the role of the kingdom of God and the parables in Jesus's teaching.

Bornkamm, Günther. *Paul*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995. Another classic work by Bornkamm, this one focused on Paul, the important early interpreter of Jesus.

Crossan, John Dominic. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. New York: HarperOne, 1993. This is a massive tome. It is a scholarly work that draws upon linguistic analysis, anthropology, and cultural history to depict Jesus as a 1st-century peasant who challenged what he considered the oppressive structures of his society. This is not light reading.

Early Christian Writings Historical Jesus Theories. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html>. A very helpful website that categorizes various theories about the historical Jesus and provides useful links to the works of the major scholars involved in Jesus research.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Ehrman argues for a return to the idea, advanced by Albert Schweitzer in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, that the historical Jesus was fundamentally motivated by his conviction that the world as we know it was soon to end. Ehrman's position is in tension with that of scholars like Borg and Crossan, who regard Jesus's work as more oriented to this-worldly concerns.

Fredriksen, Paula. *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*. New York: Vintage, 2000. Fredriksen provides an interpretation that emphasizes the Jewish character of Jesus's life and teachings.

"From Jesus to Christ." *Frontline*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>. This website is related to the excellent documentary *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*. The documentary can be viewed in its entirety here.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. New York: HarperOne, 1997. Johnson provides a well-argued critique of the positions

of scholars such as Borg, Crossan, and Funk and helps illuminate the entire field of current academic research on the historical Jesus.

Kaltner, John. *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Quran for Bible Readers*. Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Books, 1999. My friend and colleague John Kaltner has written an intriguing study that suggests the Bible and Qur'an can illuminate one another when one carefully examines what each text has to say about the characters common to them both. Kaltner's book includes interesting analyses of the Qur'anic views of Jesus and Mary.

Khalidi, Tarif. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. Many are unaware that Jesus is considered a major prophet in Islam and that the Qur'an has much to say about his life and teachings. Khalidi's book brings together the scattered references to Jesus in the Qur'an and other texts in Islamic history to provide a fine analysis of Muslim perspectives on Jesus, whom Islam knows as Isa.

Kloppenborg, John S. *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Kloppenborg's book is one of the best explanations of the so-called two-source hypothesis, which proposes that the gospels of Matthew and Luke drew upon the gospel of Mark and a no longer existing text dubbed "Q" (short for *Quelle*, the German word for "source"). *Q, the Earliest Gospel* is helpful for understanding some of the historical issues facing scholars attempting to construct a portrait of the historical Jesus.

Miles, Jack. *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*. New York: Vintage, 2002. This is a very different sort of book about Jesus. Miles is not at all interested in the Jesus available to scholars by modern historiography. His interest resides purely in Jesus as a literary character in the Bible. This book is a sequel to Miles's provocative book *God: A Biography*, in which he treats God as a literary character, just as a scholar might study Hamlet as a literary character in Shakespeare. The results of his approach are fascinating. In *Christ*, Miles asks what it means for God to take human form—not to shed light on issues of faith but as a way of illuminating the character of God as a figure in biblical narrative.

Miller, Robert J., ed. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. Revised and expanded ed. New York: HarperOne, 1994. This is a translation of the Gospels, both canonical and noncanonical. I find the renderings more vibrant and compelling than other modern translations. Recommended.

“General Resources.” *The New Testament Gateway*. <http://www.ntgateway.com/historical-jesus/general-resources>. This website is maintained by Mark Goodacre at Duke University. It provides excellent links to resources for understanding the New Testament and the scholarship concerning the historical Jesus.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Pelikan’s work is not about the historical Jesus but about how the image of Jesus has been interpreted throughout two millennia of Christian history. The book clearly demonstrates that Christian understandings of Jesus have always been intimately connected with the structure and dynamics of the wider culture. Recommended.

Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York: Penguin, 1996. This is a very readable text from an eminent scholar of the New Testament. Sanders presents an historical Jesus in his Jewish context as a prophet of the end times who was originally a follower of John the Baptist. Highly recommended.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1968. Originally published in 1906, this classic book was immensely influential in the history of modern scholarship on Jesus. Schweitzer argued that historians’ interpretations of Jesus always reflected their own preconceptions. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* effectively stopped scholarly inquiry into the historical Jesus for several decades as many New Testament scholars were convinced that the “real” Jesus was essentially inaccessible to moderns. Not an easy read for the nonspecialist.

Vermes, Geza. *Jesus in His Jewish Context*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

———. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1981.

———. *Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993.

These three books are intriguing texts, all very useful for understanding the Jewishness of Jesus.

Muhammad

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Although not focused on Muhammad, Ahmed's work provides some important material for understanding early Islamic teachings on gender and sexuality.

An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith: An Anthology of the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997. The Hadith are stories about and sayings of Muhammad that do not appear in the Qur'an. Those considered authentic are highly regarded by Muslims and are considered important in understanding the faith. This is an anthology one of the most popular collections for the English-speaking audience.

Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. Armstrong's book is a sympathetic treatment of Muhammad that is especially helpful in placing his life in the context of pre-Islamic Arabian religion. Unlike other scholars such as Rodinson, Armstrong is not dismissive of the religious dimension of the Prophet's teaching.

Bennett, Clinton. *In Search of Muhammad*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 1998. Bennett's is a balanced account of the life of the Prophet and his symbolic significance in Islam. This work is especially useful for elucidating the complex issues involved in creating a portrait of the historical Muhammad.

Emerick, Yahiya. *The Life and Work of Muhammad*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha, 2002. An accessible and lively biography by a convert to Islam. Recommended for nonscholars who are interested in a brief, well-written narrative about Muhammad's life and teaching.

Esposito, John. *Islam: The Straight Path*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. One of the best introductions to Islam available today. This is a standard text for many college courses.

Islam and Islamic Studies Resources. <http://www.uga.edu/islam>. This website is maintained by Alan Godlas, a professor at the University of Georgia, and is administered through the UGA Virtual Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Islamic World. It contains a wealth of sources on Muhammad, the Qur'an, and the entire Islamic tradition. Highly recommended.

The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah. Translated by A. Guillaume. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, reissued 2002. A modern translation of Ibn Ishaq's profoundly influential biography of the Prophet written in the 8th century.

Lings, Martin. *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. 2nd ed. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006. This is a highly regarded (and lengthy) biography of the Prophet by a western convert to Islam. As the subtitle indicates, Lings takes as his sources the earliest reliable documents relating to Muhammad's life. Recommended.

The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an. http://islamtomorrow.com/downloads/Quran_YAli.pdf. This is an online edition of the Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'an, one of the more popular English versions.

Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet. <http://www.pbs.org/muhammad>. This website is maintained by PBS and contains some good material about Muhammad and Islam related to the film *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*.

Perform Hajj—A Muslim's Pilgrimage to Mecca. <http://www.performhajj.com>. This website is all about the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah. It is replete

with text, photographs, and videos. The links to other sites are also very useful.

Peters, F. E. *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994. Another fine biography of the Prophet. Peters's analysis is especially helpful in its discussion of pre-Islamic culture.

Ramadan, Tariq. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Ramadan is a Muslim scholar at Oxford University. His biography of Muhammad is especially interesting to both Muslims and non-Muslims who wish to gain insight into how the example of the Prophet's life can inform modern spirituality.

Rodinson, Maxime. *Muhammad: Prophet of Islam*. New York: Pantheon, 1980. Most people tend to really like or really hate this biography of the Prophet. First published in 1961, Rodinson uses Marxist and psychoanalytic presuppositions to provide a thoroughly naturalistic explanation of the life of Muhammad and the rise of Islam.

The Qur'an: A New Translation. Translated by Thomas Cleary. Burr Ridge, IL: Starlatch, 2004. This is a fresh and lively translation of the Qur'an. This edition has no critical notes or index, which makes it more like the Qur'an itself. I have frequently used the Cleary translation when quoting from the Qur'an in this course.

The Qur'an and Sunnah and Hadith. <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/> and <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/>. These two websites maintained by the University of Southern California contain searchable translations of the Qur'an and Hadith.

Sultan, Sohaib N. *Qur'an and Sayings of Prophet Muhammad: Selections Annotated and Explained*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2007. A compact selection of passages from the Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'an and from the Hadith, arranged topically with commentary and notes provided by Sultan.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad is His Messenger. The Veneration of the Prophet in Muslim Piety*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985. Annemarie Schimmel was one of the premier Western scholars of Islam, particularly Sufism. This work is not a strictly a biography of Muhammad but a study analyzing the Prophet's example and symbolic importance in the history of Muslim practice.

Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961. The author's *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956) are two volumes of what is widely regarded as one of the most scholarly studies of the Prophet's life. Most readers, however, will probably not have the endurance to make through both texts. Fortunately, they have been combined and abridged to create this single, more accessible book.

The Wisdom of the Prophet: Sayings of Muhammad, Selections from the Hadith. Translated by Thomas Cleary. Boston: Shambhala, 2001. The Hadith are extra-Qur'anic anecdotes about and sayings by Muhammad. Thomas Cleary, who has also produced a translation of the Qur'an, has selected and translated some of them in this volume. This is a good introduction to the Hadith.

Credits

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